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WEE WIFIE

A Novel

BY

ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY

AUTHOR OF

'NELLIE'S MEMORIES,' 'NOT LIKE OTHER GIRLS,'

'WOOED AND MARRIED,' 'BARBARA HEATHCOTE'S TRIAL,' ETC.

A NEW EDITION

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PREFACE

THE demand for Wee Wifie has led to a re-issue in a cheaper form, but as so many years have elapsed since the story first made its appearance, the Author considered that extensive alterations would be necessary before its republication.

It has therefore been carefully revised, and, though the characters and the salient points of the plot have been left untouched, several fresh chapters have been added to assist in the more thorough development of the story.

THE AUTHOR.

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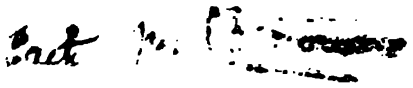

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WEE WIFIE

CHAPTER I

PROLOGUE—THE WANDERER

"Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,
Tears from the depth of some divine despair
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,
In looking on the happy Autumn-fields,
And thinking of the days that are no more."

TENNYSON'S *Princess.*

NOT much of a picture, certainly!

Only a stretch of wide sunny road, with a tamarisk hedge and a clump of shadowy elms; a stray sheep nibbling in a grass ditch; and a brown baby asleep on a bench; beyond, low broad fields of grain whitening to harvest, and a distant film and haze—blue cloudiness, and the deep monotonous sound of the great sea.

Yellow sunshine, green turf, the buoyancy of salt spray in the air; some one, trailing a white gown unheeded in the sandy dust, pauses a moment under the flickering elms to admire the scene.

She is a tall, grave woman, with serious eyes and dead-brown hair, the shade of withered leaves in autumn, with a sad beautiful face.

It is the face of one who has suffered and been patient; who has loved much and will love on to the end; who, from the depths of a noble, selfless nature, looks out upon the world

with mild eyes of charity; a woman, yet a girl in years, whom one termed his pearl among women.

Just now, standing under the elms, with her straight white folds and uncovered hair, for her sun-bonnet lay on the turf beside her, her wistful eyes looking far away seaward, one could have compared her to a Norman or a Druidical priestess under the shadow of the sacred oak; there is at once something so benignant and strong, so full of pathos, in her face and form.

Low swaying of branches, then the pattering of red and yellow rain round the rough-hewn bench, the brown baby awakes and stretches out its arms with a lusty cry—a suggestive human sound that effectually breaks up the stillness; for at the same instant an urchin whittling wood in the hedge scrambles out in haste, and a buxom-looking woman steps from the porch of an ivy-covered lodge, wringing the soap-suds from her white wrinkled hands.

Trifles mar tranquillity.

For a moment silence is invaded, and the dissonant sounds gather strength; for once infant tears fail to be dried by mother smiles, and, as if in answer to the shrill cries, flocks of snow-white geese waddle solemnly across the grass; the boy leaves off whittling wood and chases the yellow-bills; through the leafy avenue comes the loaded corn-wain, the jocund waggoner with scarlet poppies in his hat, blue corn-flowers and pink convolvuli trailing from the horses' ears; over the fields sound the distant pealing of bells.

The girl wakes up from her musing fit with a deep sigh, and her face becomes suddenly very pale; then she moves slowly across the road towards a path winding through the bare harvest fields, where the gleaners are busily at work. From under the tamarisk hedge comes the shadow of a woman; as the white gown disappears and the lodge-keeper carries off her wailing child, the shadow becomes substance and grows erect into the figure of a girl.

Of a girl in shabby black, footsore and weary, who drags herself with hesitating steps to the spot where the other woman's feet have rested, and there she stoops and hurriedly gathers a few blades of grass and presses them to her lips.

Silence once more over the landscape; the glitter of sunshine round the empty bench; the whirling of insects in the ambient air; under the shadowy elms a girl smiling bitterly over a few poor grasses, gathered as we pluck them from a loved one's grave.

* * * * *

Catharine, the lodge-keeper, sat rocking her baby in the old porch seat; through the open door one could catch glimpses of the bright red-tiled kitchen with its wooden settle, and the tortoise-shell cat asleep on the great wicker chair; beyond, the sunny little herb-garden with its plots of lavender, marjoram, and sweet-smelling thyme, the last monthly roses blooming among the gooseberry bushes; a child cliqueting up the narrow brick path with a big sun-bonnet and burnished pail; in the corner a toy fountain gurgling over its oyster-shell border, and a few superannuated ferns.

Catharine sat contentedly in the shady porch, on her lap lay the brown baby with his face all puckered up with smiles; his tiny hole of a mouth just opened ready for the small moist thumb, and his bare rosy feet beating noiseless time to the birds; he was listening besides to his mother's voice as she sat rocking him and talking unconsciously aloud.

"'Heaven bless her!' she muttered, with a cloud on her pleasant face; yes, those were her very words, as she stood like a picture under the old trees yonder."

"'Heaven bless her and him too,'—but there was not a speck of colour in her face as she said the words, and I could see the tears in her beautiful eyes. Oh, but you are a saint, Miss Margaret—every one knows that; but, as I tell Martin, it is a sin and a shame to ring the joy bells for a feckless chit that folk never set eyes on; while our darling, Miss Margaret, is left alone in the old place."

"What about Margaret, Catharine, for heaven's sake, what about Margaret?" and the shadow that had come from behind the tamarisk hedge now fell across the porch straight before the startled woman.

Catharine put down her apron from her eyes with something like a cry, and stood up trembling.

"Good gracious! is that you, Miss Crystal? why, you come before one like a flash of lightning on a summer's day, to make one palpitate all over for fear of a storm."

"And about as welcome, I suppose," returned the young stranger, bitterly, "my good Catharine, your simile is a wonderfully true one."

"I don't know nought about 'similies,' Miss Crystal, but I know you are as welcome as the flowers in May. Come in—come in—my lamb, and don't stand scorching your poor face in the sun; come in and I'll give you Martin's wicker chair by the open window, where you can smell the sea and the fields together, and I'll fetch you a sup of Daisy's new milk, for you look quite faint and moithered, like a lost and weary bird, my pretty. Yes, just like a lost and weary bird."

"You are right," murmured the girl through her pale lips; then aloud, "have your own way, for you were ever an obstinate woman, Catharine, and fetch me a draught of Daisy's sweet milk and a crust of the old brown loaf, and I will thank you and go; but not before you have told me about Margaret—all that you know, and that you hope and fear, Catharine."

"Heaven bless you, Miss Crystal, it is the same tender heart as ever, I see. Yes, you shall hear all I know; and that's little enough, I'll be bound." And so saying, she hustled up her dress over her linsey petticoat, and, taking a tin dipper from the dresser, was presently heard calling cheerfully to her milky favourite in the paddock, on her way to the dairy.

Left to herself, the girl threw herself down—not in the wicker chair, where the cat lay like a furry ball simmering in the sun,

but on the old brown settle behind the door, where she could rest her head against the wall, and see and not be seen.

She had taken off her broad-brimmed hat, and it lay on the table beside her; and the sunlight streamed through the lattice window full on her face.

Such a young face, and—heaven help her—such a sad face; so beautiful too, in spite of the lines that sorrow had evidently traced on it, and the hard bitter curves round the mouth.

The dark dreamy eyes, the pale olive complexion, the glossy hair,—in colour the sun-steeped blackness of the south,—the full curled lips and grand profile, might have befitted a Vashti; just so might the spotless queen have carried her uncrowned head when she left the gates of Shushan, and have trailed her garments in the dust with a mien as proud and as despairing.

There she sat motionless, looking over the harvest-fields, while Catharine spread a clean coarse cloth on the small oaken table beside her, and served up a frugal meal of brown bread, honey, and milk, and then stood watching her while the stranger ate sparingly and as if only necessity compelled.

"There," she said at last, looking up at Catharine with a soft pathetic smile that lent new beauty to her face; "I have done justice to your delicious fare; now draw your chair closer, for I am starving for news of Margaret, and 'like water to a thirsty soul is news from a far country.' How often I say those words to myself."

"But not bad news, surely, Miss Crystal; and it is like enough you'll think mine bad when told. Hark, it only wants the half-hour to noon, and they are man and wife now."

"Man and wife! of whom are you talking, Catharine?"

"Of whom should I be talking, dearie, but of the young master?" but the girl interrupted her with strange vehemence.

"Catharine, you will drive me crazy with that slow soft tongue of yours. How can Hugh Redmond be married while Margaret stands under the elm trees alone?"

"But it is true, Miss Crystal, for all that—as sure as the blue sky is above us—Sir Hugh Redmond weds to-day with a bonnie bit child from foreign parts that no one set eyes on, and whom he is bringing home as mistress to the old hall."

"I don't believe you!" exclaimed the girl stormily; but in spite of her words the olive complexion grew pale. "You are jesting, Catharine; you are imposing on me some village fable —some credulous report. As I love Margaret I refuse to believe you."

"The time was when a word from Catharine would have contented you, Miss Crystal," replied the woman sorrowfully, and her honest face grew overcast. "Do you think Miss Margaret's own foster-sister, who was brought up with her, would deceive you now? But it is like enough that sorrow and pride have turned your head, and the mistake of having made the first false step beside."

"Forgive me," returned the girl hoarsely; and she took the work-hardened hand and pressed it between both her own. "I will try to believe you, though I cannot realise it that Margaret —my Margaret—has been jilted."

"No, nor that either, dearie. We must not blame the poor young master beyond his deserts. He loved her true, Miss Crystal; he loved her that true that his heart was like to break; but for all that he was forced to give her up."

"I cannot understand it," in a bewildered voice. "When I left the dear old home that summer's day a year ago they had been engaged nine months; yes, it was nine months, I remember, for it was on her birthday that he asked her to be his wife, and they had loved each other long before that. Do you think I can ever forget that time?"

"I daresay not. Anyhow, things went on well for a time; the young master was always at the Grange, or Miss Margaret and Mr. Raby at the Hall; and when he was away, for he was always a bit roving, he wrote her a heap of letters; and all was as right as it could be till the old master came home."

"Ah, true! I had forgotten Sir Wilfred."

"Ay, he had been away for more than two years in the East, working for that fine book of his that folks talk about so much; but he was in bad health, and he had a strange hankering to die in the old Hall. There is an awful mystery in things, Miss Crystal; for if it had pleased Providence to have taken the poor old master before he reached the Hall, our dear Miss Margaret might have been happy now."

"Do you mean that Sir Wilfred objected to the match?"

"Well, I don't rightly know what happened, but Martin and me think there is some mystery at the bottom. Folks say, who know the young master, that he has a way of putting off things to the morrow as should be done to-day, and either he did not tell his father of his engagement to Miss Margaret, or his letters went astray in those foreign parts; but when the old master heard that Mr. Hugh had promised to marry Miss Margaret, he made an awful scene, and swore that no Ferrers should be mistress of Redmond Hall."

"Good heavens! what reason could Sir Wilfred have for refusing his consent? Margaret was beautiful, rich, and well-born. Do you mean to say that Sir Hugh was so poor a creature as to give her up for a whim?"

"No, no, Miss Crystal, dear, we don't understand the rights of it. When Mr. Hugh left the old master he just rushed up to the Grange to see Miss Margaret, and to tell her of his father's opposition; but she had a right brave spirit of her own, and she heartened him up, and bade him wait patiently and she would win over the old man yet. Well, it is a sad story, and, as I told you, neither Martin nor me know what rightly happened. Sir Wilfred came up to talk to Miss Margaret, and then she sent for Mr. Hugh, and told him they must part, that she would never marry him. That was before the old master had that stroke that carried him off, but she held firm to it after his death, and nothing that Mr. Hugh could say would move her."

"And yet, if ever woman loved man, Margaret loved Hugh Redmond."

"I know it, dearie, no one could look at her and not see that the light had gone out of her life, and that her heart was just breaking—how white you have gone, Miss Crystal!"

"I am so sorry for Margaret. Oh! Catharine, Catharine, if I had any tears left I think I could shed them all for Margaret."

"Keep them for yourself, my dearie, maybe they will cool the fever in your heart, and make you see clear, and bring you back to us again."

"Hush, hush! I will not hear you. I will only talk of my poor Margaret. She would not marry him you say."

"No, she was like a rock, not all the poor young master could say could change her resolution. I know she told him that his father was right to forbid their marriage, and though it was a cruel trouble to them both, they must bear it, for it was God's will, not Sir Wilfred's, that separated them; but he would never listen to her, and at last he just flung away in a rage and married the other."

"The other!—whom do you mean, Catharine?"

"Well, you have heard of Colonel Mordaunt, who lived up at Wyngate Priory, the big place, up yonder, some of the land adjoins the Hall lands, but the house is no better than a ruin."

"Yes, I know; Colonel Mordaunt died in India."

"Well, maybe you did not know that the Colonel had a daughter, a bit bonnie lass, who was brought up by an aunt in the country. It seems Sir Wilfred and the Colonel had always hoped to bring about a match between the young people, and after Sir Wilfred's death they found a letter with the will, charging Mr. Hugh by all that was sacred not to marry Miss Margaret, and begging him to go down to Daintree, and see Colonel Mordaunt's beautiful young daughter. Miss Margaret told me with tears in her eyes what a loving fatherly letter it was, and how it prayed Mr. Hugh to forgive him for crossing

his will; but told him at the same time that no blessing could ever follow his marriage with Margaret Ferrers."

"No blessing? There is some mystery here, Catharine."

"That is what I say, Miss Crystal, but reason or not, the poor young master was half-crazed with the disappointment; he was for setting aside everything, and going on reckless-like, but Miss Margaret she was like a rock—she could not and would not marry him; and in his anger against her, and because he did not care what became of him, he went down to Daintree and settled the matter with Miss Mordaunt, and that is all I know, Miss Crystal."

"One—two—three—four," counted the girl with a bitter smile, "four broken hearts, four mutilated lives, and the sun shines, and the birds sing—one hungers, thirsts, sleeps, and wakes again, and a benignant Creator suffers it; but hush! there are footsteps Catharine, hide me, quick."

"My dearie, don't look so scared like, it is only Mr. Raby—he passed an hour ago with the parson; but there is only wee Johnnie with him now."

"Is he coming in? I am sure I heard him lift the latch of the gate; you will keep your faith with me, Catharine?"

"Yes—yes, have I ever failed you; bide quiet a bit, he cannot see you. He is only standing in the porch, for a sup of milk. I'll fetch it from the dairy, and he'll drink it and go."

"If only Johnnie were not there," murmured the girl, anxiously.

"No, no, he has sent him on most likely to the Vicarage."

"My good Catharine," observed a quiet voice from the porch, "how long am I to wait for my glass of milk?"

"I am sorry, Mr. Raby, I am indeed," answered Catharine's cheery tones in the distance.

"Don't be sorry," returned the same voice; "waiting will do me good." And then there was silence.

The stranger stole out and peeped through the half opened door.

There was a tall man standing in the porch; a man so tall that the clustering ivy round the trellis-work quite trailed about him and touched his forehead; a man broad-shouldered and strong, but with a stooping gait like a giant worn out with labour; he was in clerical dress, but his soft felt hat was in his hand, and the grand powerful head with its heavy dead-brown hair and pale face were distinctly visible under the shadow of the ivy. He did not move at the sound of the stealthy footstep or at the light shadow that fell across him, though the girl crept so close that he could have touched her with his right hand; but on Catharine's reappearance she shrunk back with a gesture of mingled entreaty and command.

"There is the milk, Mr. Raby, and it is yellow and rich with cream to reward your patience, sir."

"Thank you," he replied, smiling, and putting out a large white hand; the stranger took the glass from Catharine and held it to him; he drank it with seeming unconsciousness and with lowered eyes. "A most delicious draught; but your hand is trembling, Catharine; are you tired or unwell?"

"Neither sir, thank you," replied Catherine, huskily, while the girl drew back in evident alarm. "Ah, there is Johnnie come for you, he is waiting at the gate; here is your stick, Mr. Raby. Don't forget your hat, for the sun is very powerful."

"No, no," returned the clergyman, absently. "Good morning, Catharine." Then, as he walked down the little brick-paved path, "How strange Catharine's hand never felt like that; it always seemed puckered and rough to me, but this felt soft and cold as it touched me, and shook so that it could hardly hold the glass. Johnnie, lad, is there any one standing in the porch with your mother?"

"No, sir, only mother."

"Strange," he muttered, "strange; I suppose it was my fancy, I am always fancying things;" and then he sighed and put his hand on the boy's shoulder, for Raby Ferrers was blind.

CHAPTER II

THE BLIND VICAR OF SANDYCLIFFE

"Over proud of course,
Even so!—but not so stupid, blind, that I,
Whom thus the great Taskmaster of the world
Has set to meditate, mistaken work,
My dreary face against a dim blank wall,
Throughout man's natural lifetime,—could pretend or wish."
BROWNING'S *Aurora Leigh*.

ABOUT five miles from Singleton, where Redmond Hall stands, is the little village of Sandycliffe, a small primitive place set in corn-fields, with long sloping fields of grain, alternating with smooth green uplands and winding lanes, with the tangled hedgerows, so well known in southern scenery.

Sandycliffe is not actually on the sea-shore, but a short walk from the village up one of those breezy uplands would bring the foot-passenger within view of the blue sea-line; on one side is Singleton, with its white cliffs and row of modest, unpretending houses, and on the other the busy port of Pierrepoint, with its bustle and traffic, its long narrow streets, and ceaseless activity. Sandycliffe lies snugly in its green hollow; a tiny village with one winding street, a few white-washed cottages grouped round a small Norman church, with a rose-covered vicarage inhabited by the curate's large family. The vicar lived a mile away, at the Grange, a large red brick house with curious gables, half covered with ivy, standing on high ground, with a grand view of the sea and the harbour of Pierrepoint.

It might seem strange to any one not conversant with the facts of the case, that the small, sparsely-populated village should require the services of a curate, and especially a hard-working man like Mr. Anderson; but a sad affliction had befallen the young vicar of Sandycliffe; the result of some illness or accident, two or three years after his ordination, had left him totally blind.

People who had heard him had prophesied great things of Mr. Ferrers,—he had the rare gift of eloquence; he was a born orator, as they said—a rising light in his profession; it was absurd that such powers should be wasted on a village congregation, made up of rustics and old women; he must preach from some city pulpit; he was a man fitted to sway the masses in the east end of London, to be a leader among his fellows; it was seldom that one saw such penetration and power united with such simple unobtrusive goodness.

Mr. Ferrers would smile a little sadly when these speeches reached his ear. He was a man who cared little for the praises of his generation; his one aim in life was to devote his talents to his Master's service—to work in the corner of the vineyard allotted to him. His inner consciousness, indeed, told him that he had capabilities for a larger sphere, a wider range of work; when the call came he would be ready to leave his few sheep in the wilderness and go out into pastures new. He was like a knight watching beside his armour until the reveillé sounded; when the time came he was ready to go down to the battle.

When the call came! Alas! it never came in this world for Raby Ferrers. In the full prime of youth and strength the mysterious doom of blindness came upon the young vicar and left him groping in a darkened world.

There was bitter trouble at the Grange just then; a young cousin of Margaret and Raby Ferrers, who had lived with them from childhood, and had been the spoilt darling of the house, had left her home suddenly, leaving no trace behind her.

Gossip had been rife in Sandycliffe, but no one except Hugh Redmond knew the rights of the case, or why the girl should have abandoned her home when Raby Ferrers was lying on a bed of suffering, and Margaret was watching beside him in trembling anguish for the result.

There were weeks and months of bodily suffering and fierce internal conflict—bitter hand to hand fights with despair. And then the strong will and faith of Raby Ferrers triumphed; back from the shadow of the valley of death he came, mutilated, scarred, and victorious; and like blind Samson, led by a boy, he one day electrified his people by entering his pulpit again; and at the sight of the changed pale face, and of the deep melodious voice speaking with its old tender authority, there was hardly a dry eye in the church.

From that day Mr. Ferrers never flinched from the purpose he had set before him as far as lay in his power to do his duty. Bound by his ordination vows, he still gloried in the dignity of his priesthood. Sunday after Sunday saw him occupying the pulpit of his little church, which, as the fame of his rare eloquence went abroad, was always crowded with strangers.

He had secured the services of an earnest hard-working man,—the ill-paid, over-worked curate of an east end parish with a large sickly family,—and installed them in the sunny pleasant vicarage.

There was little work for either of them in Sandycliffe, but they carried their joint energies farther a-field. Pierrepoint had a large poor population, and the vicar was old and supine; he accepted gladly the volunteered services of his zealous coadjutors, and, led by his faithful Johnnie, Mr. Ferrers penetrated into the winding alleys, and carried comfort to many a sick and dying bed. And as Mr. Brabazon grew more infirm, it became a rule for Mr. Ferrers to occupy his pulpit on Sunday evenings, and it was always remarked that on these occasions the church was crowded; people would come ten or twelve miles to hear the blind clergyman from Sandy-

cliffe. It was even mooted by the Bishop whether, after Mr. Brabazon's death, Pierrepoint should not be offered to Mr. Ferrers.

After the first few weeks Raby Ferrers never spoke of his blindness to any one; even his half-sister Margaret who lived with him, and was his dearest and closest friend, never heard a repining word from his lips; neither did he waste his strength by silent brooding—the activity of his life left him no time for this; when he was not occupied with his ministrations, or preparing his sermons, Margaret would read to him for hours.

Yet, it was evident to any keen observer who studied the quiet face, that some load of care lay on the bowed shoulders of Mr. Ferrers; some heavy weight that at times seemed to crush him. Sometimes when Margaret was reading to him, he would make a sign for her to stop, and, laying down the book, she would watch him pacing up and down the green alleys of the Grange garden with his sightless-eyes turned to the sunshine; but she knew that it was not of his blindness he was thinking, but of a heavier trouble still.

Few people about Sandycliffe knew that Margaret Ferrers was only Raby's half-sister; there were only a few years between them, and in the close intimacy that had grown up between the brother and sister, it was seldom remembered by either of them that they had different mothers. Colonel Ferrers had married within two years of his first wife's death, and the second Mrs. Ferrers had brought the Grange and a wealthy dowry to her husband.

But the marriage had not been a happy one, and the three last years of Mrs. Ferrers' life had been passed away from her husband. There were hints and tales of bitter scenes in the Grange, but little was known in the village; only, when Margaret was seven years old, and Raby a lad of fourteen, there was a grand funeral, such as Sandycliffe had never witnessed, and Mrs. Ferrers was laid in the same marble tomb where her predecessor was buried, and it was noted with some

surprise and a little incredulity that Colonel Ferrers seemed overcome with grief.

It was about fourteen months before Raby had stood in the large porch waiting for his glass of milk that one summer's morning the little churchyard was full of loitering villagers, waiting for the bells to stop before they hurried into their places.

The white Lady from the Grange, as some of the children called her, had just passed into the porch, after stopping to reprove some noisy urchins eating small sour apples on the tombstones; and old Granny Richardson had just hobbled in after her in her red cloak and neat black bonnet, and her prayer-book folded in a blue and white checked handkerchief with a little bunch of sweet-william and southernwood—old man they called it in those parts—to keep it company. After granny came old Samuel Tibbs, the patriarch of the village, in his clean smock and scarlet handkerchief, followed by his youngest grandson in all the glories of corduroys and hobnailed boots. Young Sam as they called him, was the youngest of fifteen, who had all grown up strong and healthy under the thatched eaves of the low white-washed cottage down by the pond. There the fifteen young Tibbses, had elbowed, and jostled, and kicked, and metaphorically pecked at each other like young rooks in a nest, and had grown up strong and hearty on a diet of bread and treacle alternating with slices of bread and dripping, running barefoot over the grass and splashing like young ducks in the pond, until promoted to hobnailed boots and bird-scaring, with a promise of riding the plough-horses to water, and an occasional bird-nesting expedition on their own account.

The bell had stopped, and the last loiterer had taken his place on the oak bench, when as usual two strangers took their places in a seat that was usually occupied by any chance worshipper.

Most of the little congregation were familiar with the features of the younger man, and every one in the village knew

that the tall, broad-shouldered man with the fair beard and handsome aristocratic face was the young master from Redmond Hall, who was to marry Miss Margaret, the vicar's sister.

But even young Sam Tibbs leaves off admiring his hobnailed boots to stare at the brown sickly-looking gentleman with the white moustache that occupies the other end of the seat; and Margaret, sitting with the school children, looks curiously in the same direction, for this is the first time that she has seen Sir Wilfred Redmond since his return from Persia.

Both father and son are wonderfully alike, she thinks; they have both the same heavy-lidded blue-grey eyes, the same proud carriage of the head and stately presence; but the bright sunshiny smile that greeted her from Hugh Redmond is certainly not reproduced on his father's sombre face. Sir Wilfred looked ill and saddened; and evidently the report that ill-health had brought his researches to a speedy end was probably true.

Sir Wilfred listened with grave attention to Mr. Ferrers' eloquent sermon. The deep musical voice and fine delivery seemed to rivet him; he sat motionless, with his thin hands grasping each other, his eyes fixed on the pale, powerful face which the morning sunshine touched with a sort of glory.

As usual Hugh Redmond's attention strayed to the corner where Margaret sat, the light from the painted window reached her, staining her white gown with patches of prismatic colour,—a bordering of crimson and blue and violet,—and giving a golden tinge to her dead-brown hair; and as Hugh looks at her he tells himself again that he has never seen any one to compare with her—his pearl among women.

When the service was over, and the small congregation had streamed out of the church, Sir Wilfred left his seat, and walked up the aisle to inspect the chancel. He evidently thought his son was following him, for he turned round once to address him; but Hugh had noticed that Margaret had quietly slipped through a side door, and he hastily followed her.

She was standing under the shade of a willow, looking at a newly-made grave, but she turned with a smile when she saw him striding over the grass, with the sun shining on his golden brown head.

"Margaret," he said, reproachfully, "why have you not waited to speak to my father? Raby has just joined him."

A quick blush crossed Margaret's face,—her lover's question seemed to pain her,—but she answered with her accustomed gentleness.

"Surely you must know, dear; how could I meet Sir Wilfred when he is still in ignorance of our engagement."

"Ah true, I forgot," with a short uneasy laugh; but it was Hugh's turn now to look uncomfortable. "What a little puritan you are, darling, as though half a dozen civil words would have mattered."

"But I could not have said them, Hugh," with quiet firmness; "I should have felt awkward and constrained in your father's presence; I should have betrayed our secret by my very silence."

"Ah, well, it will be a secret no longer," with an impatient sigh. "You look at me very reproachfully this morning, Margaret, but indeed I have not been to blame so much as you think; my father was tired from his journey yesterday. I am afraid he is in very bad health. I confess I am anxious about him. We had so much to talk about, and he is so full of that wonderful book of his. Come, cheer up, dear; I will not have you look so serious; I will promise you that he shall know of our engagement before I sleep to-night."

"Really and truly, Hugh."

"Really and truly, dear; now say something kind to me before I go."

Ten minutes afterwards Margaret walked slowly down the churchyard to join Raby, who was waiting for her at the gate. He heard her footstep, and held out his hand to her.

"I was wondering what had become of you, Margaret. Sir

Wilfred has been talking to me for a long time; he asked after you, but of course I made some excuse; I think I know why you hid yourself."

"That could only be one reason, Raby."

"Ah, I was right then. I said to myself, depend upon it, Madge means to stand on her dignity, and read Hugh a lesson, and I hope he will profit by it. I do believe Hugh's favourite motto is 'never do to-day what you can put off until to-morrow.'"

"I think you are a little hard on Hugh; he has promised that he will speak to his father to-day."

"I am glad of that," very gravely. "I confess that this procrastination has made me very uneasy; it was not treating you fairly, Margaret, to leave his father all these months in ignorance of the engagement."

"Yes, but you forget," interposed his sister eagerly, "he did write telling Sir Wilfred everything, but the letter never reached him. You are generally so charitable, Raby, and yet you misjudge poor Hugh so readily."

There was an injured tone in Margaret's voice that made Raby smile; he knew that she was blind to Hugh's faults—that she believed in him with all a loving woman's credulity; and yet as he smiled he sighed.

He knew his sister well, the simplicity and strength of her nature, the unselfishness and purity of her aims,—few women had so high a standard,—and he reverenced as well as loved her, for every day showed him new beauties in her character. But his knowledge of his sister made him doubt the wisdom of her choice; in his heart he had never really approved of her engagement with Hugh Redmond. Hugh was a capital fellow, he told himself; a pleasant companion, loveable in his way, and not without his special gifts, but he was not worthy of Margaret.

Raby had not always been blind, and his intimacy with Hugh Redmond had given him plenty of opportunity to judge truly of his friend's defects. He knew Hugh was manly and

generous, but he was also weak and impulsive, hot-tempered and prone to restlessness; and he marvelled sadly how Margaret's calm grand nature should centre its affections and hopes on such an unstable character as Hugh Redmond.

"She will never be happy with him," he said to himself; "one day he must disappoint her. Oh, I know well there is no harm in him; every one would call him a good fellow; he is clever, he has plenty of pluck, he has gentlemanly feelings, and he worships Margaret. But in my opinion the wife should not be superior to the husband; if there must be weakness, it should be on the other side. And here Raby sighed, and gave himself up to melancholy and more personal broodings, and he thought how strange and baffling were the perversities of human nature, and how hearts clave to each other—in spite of a hundred faults and blemishes—as Margaret's clave to Hugh Redmond.

No, there was no love without suffering, he thought; even happy love had its thrills and tremors of doubt, its hours of anticipatory fears. A little while ago and his own life had stretched before him, bright, hopeful, and full of enjoyment, and then a cloud had blotted out all the goodly land of promise, and he had been left poor prisoner of hope on the dim borders, led in paths that he truly had not known—mysterious paths of suffering and patience.

Raby had not answered his sister's reproachful speech, but he had taken her hand and pressed it, as though asking her pardon.

"I wish you thought better of Hugh," she said softly, as she felt his caressing gesture; and Raby smiled again.

"I do think well of him. Who am I that I should judge my fellows? But I have not seen the man yet who is worthy of my Margaret. Come, is not that a lover-like speech; Hugh himself might have said it. But here we are at home; I can smell the roses in the porch; they are a sweet welcome to a blind man, are they not, Madge?"

CHAPTER III

UNDER THE OLD WALNUT-TREE

"Thus oft the mourner's wayward heart
Tempts him to hide his grief and die,
Too feeble for confession's smart,
Too proud to bear a pitying eye;

"How sweet in that dark hour to fall
On bosoms waiting to receive
Our sighs, and gently whisper all!
They love us—will not God forgive?"

KEBLE'S *Christian Year.*

STRANGERS passing through Sandycliffe always paused to admire the picturesque old Grange, with its curious gables and fantastically twisted chimneys, its mullion windows and red brick walls half smothered in ivy, while all sorts of creepers festooned the deep shady porch, with its long oaken benches, that looked so cool and inviting on a hot summer's day, while the ever open door gave a glimpse of a hall furnished like a sitting-room, with a glass door leading to a broad gravel terrace. The smoothly-shaven lawn in front of the house was shaded by two magnificent elms; a quaint old garden full of sweet-smelling, old-fashioned flowers lay below the terrace, and a curious yew-tree walk bordered one side. This was Mr. Ferrers' favourite walk, where he pondered over the subject for his Sunday's sermons. It was no difficulty for him to find his way down the straight alley. An old walnut-tree at the end with a broad circular seat and a little strip of grass round it was always known as the "Master's summer study." It was here

that Margaret read to him in the fresh dewy mornings when the thrushes were feeding on the lawn, or in the evenings when the birds were chirping their good-nights, and the lark had come down from the gate of heaven to its nest in the corn-field, and the family of greenfinches that had been hatched in the branches of an old acacia-tree were all asleep and dreaming of the "early worm."

People used to pity Margaret for having to spend so many hours over such dull, laborious reading; the homilies of the old Fathers and the abstract philosophical treatises in which Mr. Ferrers' soul delighted must have been tedious to his sister, they said, but if they had but known it, their pity was perfectly wasted.

Margaret's vigorous intellect was quite capable of enjoying and assimilating the strong hardy diet provided for it; she knew Mr. Ferrers' favourite authors, and would pause of her own accord to read over again some grand passage or trenchant argument.

Hugh had once laughingly called her a blue-stocking when he had found the brother and sister at their studies, but he had no idea of the extent of Margaret's erudition; in earlier years she had learnt a little Greek, and was able to read the Greek Testament to Raby,—she was indeed "his eyes," as he fondly termed her, and those who listened to the eloquent sermons of the blind vicar of Sandycliffe little knew how much of that precious store of wisdom and scholarly research was owing to Margaret's unselfish devotion; Milton's daughters reading to him in his blindness were not more devoted than she.

When their early Sunday repast was over, Margaret, as usual, led the way to the old walnut-tree seat; she had Keble's *Christian Year* in her hand and a volume of Herbert's poems, —for wearied by his labours, Raby often preferred some sacred poetry or interesting biography to be read to him between the services, or often he bade her close her book or read to herself if his thoughts were busy with his evening sermon.

The strip of lawn that surrounded the walnut-tree led to a broad gravel walk with a sun-dial and a high southern wall where peaches ripened, and nectarines and apricots sunned themselves; here there was another seat, where on cold autumn mornings or mild winter days one could sit and feel the mild chastened sunshine stealing round one with temperate warmth; a row of beehives stood under the wall, where sweetest honey from the surrounding clover-fields was made by the busy brown workers, "the little liverymen of industry," as Raby called them, or "his preachers in brown."

Margaret glanced at her brother rather anxiously as she took her place beside him; he looked more than usually tired, she thought; deep lines furrowed his broad forehead, and the firmly compressed lips spoke of some effort to repress heart-weariness.

"He is thinking of our poor child," she said to herself as she turned to the beautiful poem for the seventh Sunday after Trinity: "From whence can a man satisfy these men with bread here in the wilderness"—the very text as she knew that Raby had selected for his evening sermon at Pierrepoint; but as her smooth melodious voice lingered involuntarily over the third verse, a sigh burst from Raby's lips.

> "Landscape of fear! yet, weary heart,
> Thou need'st not in thy gloom depart,
> Nor fainting turn to seek thy distant home:
> Sweetly thy sickening throbs are eyed
> By the kind Saviour at thy side;
> For healing and for balm e'en now thy hour is come."

"Oh, that it were come for both of us," muttered Raby in a tone so husky with pain that Margaret stopped.

"You are thinking of Crystal," she said softly, leaning towards him with a face full of sympathy. "That verse was beautiful; it reminded me of our child at once,"—but as he hid his face in his hands without answering her, she sat motionless in her place, and for a long time there was silence between them.

But Margaret's heart was full, and she was saying to herself:

"Why need I have said that, as though he ever forgot her? poor Raby—poor unhappy brother—forget her! when every night in the twilight I see him fold his hands as though in prayer, and in the darkness can hear him whisper, 'God bless my darling and bring her home to me again.'"

"Margaret!"

"Yes, dear;" but as she turned quickly at the beseeching tone in which her name was uttered, a smile came to her lips, for Raby's hand was feeling in his inner breast pocket, and she knew well what that action signified; in another moment he had drawn out a letter and had placed it in Margaret's outstretched palm. Ever since this letter had reached them about two months ago, each Sunday the same silent request had been made to her, and each time, as now, she had taken it without hesitation or comment, and had read it slowly from beginning to end.

The envelope bore the Leeds postmarks, and the letter itself was evidently written hurriedly in a flowing, girlish hand.

"My dearest Margaret," it began, "I feel to-night as though I must write to you; sometimes the home-sickness is so bitter—the longing so intense to see your dear face again—that I can hardly endure it; there are times when the restlessness is so unendurable that I cannot sit still and bear it—when I feel as though I have but one wish in the world, just to feel your arms round me again, and hear from your lips that I am forgiven, and then lie down and die.

"You suffer too, you say, in the one letter that has reached me; I have ever over-shadowed your happiness. You and Raby are troubling your kind hearts about me, but indeed there is no need for any fresh anxiety.

"I have met with good Samaritans. The roof that shelters me is humble indeed, but it shelters loving hearts and simple kindly natures,—natures as true as yours, Margaret,—gentle high-souled women, who, like the charitable traveller in the

Bible, have sought to pour oil and wine into my wounds. How you would love them for my sake, but still more for their own!

"These kindly strangers took me in without a word—they asked no questions; I was young, friendless, and unhappy, that was all they cared to know.

"I must tell you very little about them, for I do not wish to give you any clue to my home at present; they are a mother and two daughters in reduced circumstances, but having unmistakably the stamp of gentlewomen; both mother and daughter, for the second is only a child, have high cultured natures. The mother—forgive me, Margaret, for I dare not mention her name—teaches in a school close by us, and her daughter is also a daily governess. I am thankful to say that their recommendations have procured me work of the same kind; I give morning lessons to two little boys, and Fern—that is the eldest daughter's name—and I have also obtained some orders for embroidery to fill up our leisure hours, and occupy our hands while we teach Fern's youngest sister.

"And now I have told you all this, will you not be comforted a little about me; will you not believe that as far as possible things are well with me? Tell him—tell Raby—that when I have wiped out my sin a little by this bitter penance and mortification, till even I can feel I have suffered and repented enough, I will come back and look on your dear face again. And this for you, Margaret; know that in the blameless hard-working life I lead that I have forgotten none of your counsel, and that I so walk in the hard and lonely path that I have marked out for myself that even you could find no fault.—Farewell, CRYSTAL."

As Margaret's voice died away, Raby turned his sightless face to her.

"You may give it back to me, Margaret, but stay, there is the copy of your answer; I think I would like to hear that once again; and Margaret obediently opened the thin folded paper.

"My poor Darling—At last we have heard from you—at last you have yielded to my urgent request for some news of your daily life. God bless you for lifting a little of the weight off us, for telling us something about yourself and your work. I could not help crying bitterly over your letter, to think that a humble roof shelters our child; that you are compelled to work for your living; you, Crystal, who have never known what it is to want anything; upon whom a rough wind was not suffered to blow. My child, come home. What need is there of penance and expiation when all has been forgiven? The evil spirit that tormented our child has been cast out, and you are clothed afresh and in your right mind now; come home, for Raby's sake, and be his darling as of old! Do you know how he longs for you? Daily he asks 'Any news of her, Margaret?' and last night, as I was passing his study door, he called me in and bade me give you this message—'Tell my child, Margaret,' he said, 'that every night I bless her and fall asleep breathing her name; tell her that my forgiveness and blessing are ever with her; that there is no bitterness in my heart; that she cannot escape from my love; that it will follow her to the world's end. And tell her, Margaret, that if she do not soon come back to me, that I, Raby—blind, helpless, useless, as I am—will seek her through God's earth till I find her and bring her back.' Ah, surely you must weep as you read this, Crystal. I pray that every tear may be God's own dew to melt and break up the hardness of your heart. Your ever loving Margaret."

"That was written nearly two months ago, Madge, and she has not come yet."

"No, dear, we must have patience."

Raby sighed impatiently. "So you always say; but it is hard to be patient under such circumstances—to know that the woman you love has made herself an exile from all she holds dear. Margaret, I was wrong not to tell her what I felt. I

sometimes fear that she misjudged my silence. But she was so young."

"You meant it for the best, Raby?"

"Yes, I meant it for the best," he answered, slowly. "I did not wish to take advantage of her youth; it did not seem right or honourable. Let her go into the world a little and see other men, that is what I said to myself. Even now, I hardly think I was wrong."

"No, you were right, quite right; but you need not have dreaded the result of such an ordeal; Crystal would never have loved any one but you, Raby. I sometimes think"—but here she hesitated.

"You think what, Margaret?"

"That she was jealous of Mona—that she misunderstood you there?"

"Good heavens! Mrs. Grey!"

"Crystal was so young, and she did not know that poor Mona's life was doomed. I have seen her look at Mona so strangely when you were talking to her; and once she asked me if you admired fair women, and if you did not think Mrs. Grey very beautiful; and when I said yes, I remember she turned very pale, and did not answer."

"I never thought of this," he returned, in a tone of grief. "It must have been one of her sick fancies, poor unhappy child—as though my heart had ever swerved from her for an instant. What do you think, Margaret, could she care for the blind man still?"

"More than ever, dear. If I know Crystal, her heart has belonged to you from a child."

"There speaks my comforter"—with one of his rare smiles; "you are always good to me, Madge. Now read to me a little, and let me banish these weary thoughts. One little clue—one faint hint—and I would keep my word and seek for her; but, as you say, we must have patience a little longer," and Raby straightened himself and composed himself to listen, and they

sat there until the evening sunshine began to creep about the sun-dial, and it was time for Raby to walk over to Pierrepoint.

It is well for some of us that coming events do not always cast their shadow before; that we lie down to rest in happy ignorance of what the next day may bring forth. As Margaret looked out on the moonlight that evening, she little thought that that Sunday was the last day of her happy girlhood—that the morrow held a bitter trial in store for her.

She was sitting alone in the morning-room, the next afternoon, when Sir Wilfred Redmond was announced, and the next moment the old man entered the room.

A faint blush came to Margaret's cheeks as she rose to greet him. This visit meant recognition of her as his son's fiancée; and yet, why did he come alone—why was not Hugh with him? Hugh's father was almost a stranger to her. He was a man of reserved habits, who had never been very sociable with his neighbours, and Margaret had seen little of him in her girlish days.

"It is very good of you to come so soon, Sir Wilfred," she said, blushing still more rosily under his penetrating glance. "I am so sorry that my brother is out; he has gone over to Pierrepoint."

"I came here to see you and not your brother," returned Sir Wilfred; but he did not look at her as he spoke, and Margaret noticed that he seemed rather nervous. "My business is with you, Miss Ferrers; I have just heard strange news—that you and my son are engaged; is that true?"

Margaret bowed her head. She thought Sir Wilfred's manner rather singular—he had met her with coldness; there was certainly no trace of warmth, no cordiality in the loose grasp of her hand. She wondered what made him speak in that dry, measured voice, and why, after his first keen glance at her, he had averted his eyes. He looked older than he had done yesterday, and there was a harassed expression in his face. "It is rather strange," he went on, "that Hugh should have left me

in ignorance all these months, but that"—as Margaret seemed about to speak—"is between me and him, I do not include you in the blame. On the contrary,"—speaking now with some degree of feeling,—"I am sorry for you, Miss Ferrers, for I have come to tell you, what Hugh refuses to do, that I cannot consent to my son's marrying you."

Margaret started, and the proud indignant colour rose to her face; but she restrained herself.

"May I ask your reason, Sir Wilfred?"

"I have a very good, sufficient reason," returned the old man, sadly; "Hugh is my only son."

"I do not understand——"

"Perhaps not, and it is my painful task to enlighten you. Miss Ferrers," hesitating a little, "I do not wonder at my son's choice, now I see you; I am quite sure that you are all he represents you to be; that in all respects you are fitted to be the wife of a wealthier man than Hugh. But for my boy's sake I am compelled to appeal to your generosity, your sense of right, and ask you to give him up."

"I cannot give your son up," returned Margaret, with noble frankness; "I am promised to him, and we love each other dearly."

"I know that," and for a moment Sir Wilfred's eyes rested on the beautiful face before him with mingled admiration and pain, and his voice softened insensibly. "My dear, I know how my boy loves you, how his whole heart is centred on you. I can do nothing with him—he will not listen to reason; his passion for you is over-mastering, and blinds him to his best interest. I have come to you to help me save him in spite of himself."

At this solemn adjuration Margaret's face grew pale, and for the first time her courage forsook her.

"I cannot bear this," she returned, and her young voice grew thin and sharp. "Why do you not speak plainly and tell me what you mean? Why do you ask me to save Hugh—my

Hugh—when I am ready to give up my whole life to him? You speak as if his marriage with me would bring him a curse."

"As it most surely would to him and to his children, Miss Ferrers. Margaret,—I may call you Margaret, for I knew you as a child,—it is no fault of yours if that be the truth. My dear, has no one told you about your mother?"

She looked at him with wide open, startled eyes. "My mother, Sir Wilfred! no, I was only seven when she died. I think," knitting her white brows as though she were trying to recall that childish past, "that she was very ill—she had to go away for a long time, and my poor father seemed very sad. I remember he cried dreadfully at her funeral, and Raby told me I ought to have cried too."

"I loved your mother, Margaret," returned the old man, and his mouth twitched under his white moustache. "You are not like her; she was dark, but very beautiful. Yes, she was ill, with that deadly hereditary illness that we call by another name; so ill that for years before her death her husband could not see her."

"You mean——" asked Margaret, but her dry white lips refused to finish the sentence. Sir Wilfred looked at her pityingly, as he answered—

"She was insane. It was in the family—they told me so, and that was why I did not ask her to marry me. She was beautiful, and so many loved her—your father and I among the number. Now you know, Margaret, that while my heart bleeds for you both, I ask you to release my son."

CHAPTER IV

"WHEN WE TWO PARTED"

"Nay—sometimes seems it I could even bear
To lay down humbly this love-crown I wear,
Steal from my palace, helpless, hopeless, poor,
And see another queen it at the door—
If only that the king had done no wrong,
If this my palace where I dwelt so long
Were not defiled by falsehood entering in.
There is no loss but change; no death but sin;
No parting, save the slow corrupting pain
Of murdered faith that never lives again."

MISS MULOCK.

THE following evening Margaret walked down the narrow path leading to the shore. It was a glorious evening, warm with the dying sunset, gorgeous with red and golden light.

Broad margins of yellow sands, white headlands, mossy cliffs, with the scarlet poppies and pink-eyed convolvuli growing out of the weedy crevices; above, a blue ineffable sky scored deeply with tinted clouds, and a sea dipping on the shore with a long slow ripple of sound; under a boulder a child bathing her feet in a little runlet of a pool, while all round, heaped up with coarse wavy grasses, lay seaweed—brown, coralline, and purple—their salty fragrance steeping the air; everywhere the sound of cool splashes and a murmur of peace.

The child sat under the boulder alone, a small brown creature in picturesque-looking rags, a mere waif and stray of a child, with her feet trailing in the pool; every now and then

small mottled crabs scrambled crookedly along, or dug graves for themselves in the dry waved sand. The girl watched them idly, as she flapped long ribbons of brown seaweed, or dribbled the water through her hollowed hands, while a tired sea-gull that had lowered wing was skimming slowly along the margin of the water.

Another time Margaret would have paused to speak to the little waif of humanity before her, for she was a lover of children, and was never happier than when she was surrounded by these little creatures—the very babies crowed a welcome to her from their mother's arms. But this evening Margaret's eyes had a strange unseeing look in them; they were searching the winding shore for some expected object, and she scarcely seemed to notice the little one at her play.

Only four-and-twenty hours had passed since Sir Wilfred had paid that ill-omened visit to the Grange, and yet some subtle mysterious change had passed over Margaret. It was as though some blighting influence had swept over her; her face was pale, and her eyes were swollen and dim as though with a night's weeping, and the firm beautiful mouth was tremulous with pain.

"I thought I should have met him by now," she murmured; "I am nearly at the boathouse; surely Sir Wilfred must have given him my message." But the doubt had hardly crossed her mind before a tall figure turned the corner by the lonely boathouse, and the next moment Hugh was coming rapidly towards her.

"Margaret!" he exclaimed, as he caught hold of her outstretched hands, "what does this mean? why have you kept me away from you all these hours, and then appointed this solitary place for our meeting?" Then, as she did not answer, and he looked at her more closely, his voice changed: "Good heavens! what has happened; what has my father done to you? How ill! how awfully ill you look, my darling!"

"It is nothing; I have not slept," she returned, trying to

speak calmly. "I am unhappy, Hugh, and trouble has made me weak."

"You weak," incredulously; then, as he saw her eyes filling with tears, "sit down on this smooth white boulder, and I will place myself at your feet. Now give me your hand, and tell me what makes you so unlike yourself this evening."

Margaret obeyed him, for her limbs were trembling, and a sudden mist seemed to hide him from her eyes; when it cleared, she saw that he was watching her with unconcealed anxiety.

"What is it, Margaret?" he asked, still more tenderly; "what is troubling you, my darling?" But he grew still more uneasy when she suddenly clung to him in a fit of bitter weeping and asked him over and over again between her sobs to forgive her for making him so unhappy.

"Margaret," he said at last, very gently but firmly, "I cannot have you say such things to me; forgive you who have been the blessing of my life; whose only fault is that you love me too well."

"I cannot be your blessing now, Hugh;" and then she drew herself from his embrace. "Do you remember this place, dear? it was on this boulder that I was sitting that evening when you found me and asked me to be your wife. We have had some happy days since then, Hugh, have we not? and now to-night I have asked you to meet me here, that you may hear from my lips that I shall never be any man's wife, most certainly not yours, Hugh—my Hugh—whom I love ten thousand times more than I have ever loved you before."

A pained, surprised look passed over Hugh's handsome face. It was evident that he had not expected this. The next moment he gave a short derisive laugh.

"So my father has made mischief between us; he has actually made you believe it would be a sin to marry me. My darling, what nonsense; I know all about your poor mother—many families have this sort of thing; do you think that ever keeps people from marrying? If we had known before, as I told

my father, well, perhaps it might have made a difference, but now it is too late, nothing would ever induce me to give you up, Margaret; in my eyes you are already as bound to me as though you were my wife. My father has nothing to do with it —this is between you and me."

"Hugh, listen to me; I have promised Sir Wilfred that I will never marry you."

"Then your promise must be null and void; you are mine, and I claim you, Margaret."

"No, no!" she returned, shrinking from him; "I will never be any man's wife. I have told Raby so, and he says I am right."

"Margaret, are you mad to say such things to me? I am not a patient man, and you are trying me too much," and Hugh's eyes flashed angrily. "Do you want me to doubt your love?"

"Do not make it too hard for me," she pleaded. "Do you think this costs me nothing—that I do not suffer too? you will not be cruel to me, Hugh, because I am obliged to make you unhappy. It is not I, but the Divine Will that has interposed this barrier to our union. Ah, if Raby or I had but known, all this would have been spared you."

"It is too late," returned Hugh, gloomily; "you have no longer the right to dispose of yourself, you are mine—how often am I to tell you that? Do you think that I will ever consent to resign you, that I could live my life without you. What do I care about your mother? such things happen again and again in families, and no one thinks of them. If I am willing to abide by the consequences, no one else has a right to object."

Poor Hugh! he was growing more sore and angry every moment. He had anticipated some trouble from Margaret's interview with his father; he knew her scrupulous conscience, and feared that a long and weary argument might be before him, but he had never really doubted the result. Life without Margaret would be simply insupportable; he could not grasp the idea for a moment.

Margaret—his Margaret—refuse to be his wife! His whole impetuous nature rose against such a cruel sentence—neither God nor man had decreed it; it was unreasonable, untrue, to suppose such a thing. How could he think of the consequences to his unborn children, of the good of future generations of Redmonds, when he could hear nothing but the voice of his passion that told him no other woman would be to him like Margaret? The news had indeed been a shock to him, but as he had told his father, nothing should prevent his marrying Margaret.

But he little knew the woman with whose will he had to cope. Margaret's very love for him gave her strength to resist—besides, she could not look at things from Hugh's point of view. If she had married him she would never have known a moment's peace. If she had had children and they had died, she would have regarded their death as a punishment. She would have seen retributive justice in every trouble that came upon them, till she must have pined and withered in her remorse. But she would never marry him. In that calm, loving heart there was a fund of strength and endurance truly marvellous. In her spirit of self-sacrifice she belonged to the noble army of women of whose ranks the proto-martyr, Mary of Nazareth, was first and chief; who can endure to suffer and to see their beloved suffer: who can thrust, uncomplainingly, the right hand—if need be—into the purifying flame, and so go through life halt or maimed, so that their garments may be always white and stainless.

And so looking upon him whom she loved, she gave him up for ever; and Hugh's anguish and despair failed to shake her resolution. The Divine Will had forbidden their union; she had promised his father that she would never marry him; she had vowed in last night's bitter conflict never to be the wife of any man. This was what she told him, over and over again, and each time there was a set look about her beautiful mouth that told Hugh that there was no hope for him.

He came to believe it at last, and then his heart was very bitter against her. He said to himself, and then aloud—for in his angry passion he did not spare her, and his hard words bruised her gentle soul, most pitilessly; he said that she did not love him, that she never had, that that cold, pure soul of hers was incapable of passion; and he wondered with an intolerable anguish of anger whether she would suffer if he took her at her word and married another; and when he had flung these cruel words at her—for he was half maddened with misery—he had turned away from her with a groan, and had hidden his head in his hands. His wishes had ceased to influence her; she had given him up; she would never be his wife, and all the sunshine and promise of his youth seemed dimmed.

But Margaret would not leave him like this; the next moment she was kneeling beside him on the sand. They say there is always something of the maternal element in the love of a good woman; and there was something of this protecting tenderness in Margaret's heart as she drew Hugh's head to her shoulder. He did not resist her; the first fierceness of his anger had now died out, and only the bitterness of his despair remained.

"Hugh, before we part to-night, will you not tell me that you forgive me?"

"How am I to tell you that," he answered, in a dull weary voice, "when you are robbing my life of its happiness?"

"Oh, Hugh, when I loved you."

"You are proving your love"—with the utmost bitterness; but she answered him with the same gentleness.

"You are still angry with me. Well, I must bear your anger; it will only make it all a little harder for me. If you could have said a word that would have helped me to bear it—but no—you are too unhappy; by and by you will do me justice."

"I am not a saint like you," he answered harshly; "I have

a man's feelings. You have often told me I am passionate and wilful—well, you were right."

"Yes, you were always wilful, Hugh, but you have never been cruel to me before; it is cruel to doubt my love because my duty compels me to give you up. Ah," with a sudden passionate inflection in her voice, "do you know of what self-sacrifice a woman can be capable? for your dear sake, Hugh, I am content to suffer all my life, to stand aside and be nothing to you—yes, even to see another woman your wife, if only you will be brave and true to yourself, if you will live your life worthily. Will you promise me this, Hugh?"

"I will promise nothing," was the reckless answer; "I will take no lie upon my lips even to please you, Margaret."

"Then it must be as God wills," she returned with white lips; "this pain will not last for ever. One day we shall meet where it will be no sin to love each other. Good-bye until then, Hugh—my Hugh."

"You are not leaving me, Margaret," and Hugh's arms held her strongly; but the next moment they had dropped to his side—she had stooped and kissed him on the forehead, and the touch of those cold lips seemed his death-warrant; the next moment he was alone, and Margaret was walking swiftly along the little path hollowed out of the cliff. The sunset clouds had long ago faded, and only a grey sky and sea remained.

Half an hour later, as Margaret turned in at the gate of the Grange, a dark figure standing bare-headed under the trees came in groping fashion to meet her.

"Is that you, Margaret?"

"Yes, it is I," and Margaret stood still and motionless until Raby touched her.

"Have you seen him, dear?"

"Yes, it is all over." And then she said a little wildly, "I have done my duty, Raby; I have broken his heart and my own;" but even as she spoke, Raby took her in his arms, and

low words of blessings seemed to falter on his lips. "My brave sister, but I never doubted for a moment that you would do the right thing. And now be comforted; the same Divine Providence that has exacted this sacrifice will watch over Hugh."

"I know it," she said, weeping bitterly; "but he will have to suffer—if I could only suffer for both!"

"He will not suffer one pang too much," was the quiet answer; "but you are worn out, and I will not talk more to you to-night. Go to your own room, Margaret; to-morrow we will speak of this again." But before she left him he blessed her once more.

CHAPTER V

THE LITTLE PRINCESS

"Her feet beneath her petticoat
Like little mice, stole in and out,
As if they feared the light:
But oh! she dances such a way,
No sun upon an Easter day
Is half so fine a sight."

SUCKLING.

ONE lovely spring afternoon Hugh Redmond walked through the narrow winding lanes that lead to the little village of Daintree.

The few passers-by whom he encountered glanced curiously at the tall handsome man in deep mourning, but Hugh did not respond to their looks—he had a grave pre-occupied air, and seemed to notice little; he looked about him listlessly, and the beautiful country that lay bathed in the spring sunlight did not seem to excite even a passing admiration in his mind; the budding hedgerows, the gay chirpings of the unseen birds, busy with family cares, were all unheeded in that hard self-absorbed mood of his. Things had gone badly with Hugh Redmond of late; his broken engagement with Margaret Ferrers had been followed by Sir Wilfred's death. Hugh's heart had been very bitter against his father, but before Sir Wilfred died there had been a few words of reconciliation. "You must not be angry with me, Hugh," the old man had said; "I did it for the best. We were both right, both she and

I,—ah, she was a fine creature; but when one remembered her poor mother's end—well, we will not speak of that," and then looking wistfully at his son's moody face, he continued plaintively, "My boy, you will be brave, and not let this spoil your life. I know it is hard on you, but you must not forget you are a Redmond. It will be your duty to marry. When I am gone, go down and see Colonel Mordaunt's daughter; people tell me she is a pretty little creature; you might take a fancy to her, Hugh;" and half to pacify the old man, and half because he was so sick of himself that he did not care what became of him, Hugh muttered a sort of promise that he would have a look at the girl, and then for a time he forgot all about it.

Some months after, a chance word spoken by a friend brought back this promise to his memory.

He had been spending a few days at Henley with some old college friends, when one of them mentioned Daintree, and the name brought back his father's dying words.

"I may as well do it," he said to himself that night; "the other fellows are going back to London; it will not hurt me to stop another day"—and so he settled it.

Hugh scarcely knew why he went, or what he intended to do; in his heart he was willing to forget his trouble in any new excitement; his one idea during all these months had been to escape the misery of his own thoughts. Yes, he would see the young heiress whom his father had always wished him to marry; he remembered her as a pretty child some seven or eight years ago, and wondered with a listless sort of curiosity what the years had done for her, and whether they had ripened or destroyed what was certainly a fair promise of beauty.

Poor Hugh! It would have been better for him to have travelled and forgotten his disappointment before such an idea had come into his head. Many a one in his case would have shaken off the dust of their native land, and, after having seen strange countries and undergone novel experiences, have

returned home partially or wholly cured—perhaps to love again, this time more happily. But with Hugh the time had not yet come. He was terribly tenacious in his attachments, but just then anger against Margaret had for a little time swallowed up love. He said to himself that he would forget her yet—that he would not let any woman spoil his life. If he sinned, circumstances were more to blame than he. Fate was so dead against him, his case was so cruelly hard. Alas, Hugh Redmond was not the only man who, stung by passion, jealousy, or revenge, has taken the first downward step on the green slippery slope that leads to Avernus.

Hugh almost repented his errand when he came in sight of the little Gothic cottage with its circular porch, where Miss Mordaunt and her niece lived.

The cottage stood on high ground, and below the sloping garden lay a broad expanse of country—meadows and ploughed fields—that in autumn would be rich with waving corn, closed in by dark woods, beyond which lay the winding invisible river. As Hugh came up the straight carriage drive, he caught sight of a little girl in a white frock playing with a large black retriever on the lawn.

The dog was rather rough in his play, and his frolics brought a remonstrance from his little mistress; "Down, Nero! down, good dog!" exclaimed a fresh young voice; "now we must race fairly," and the next moment there were twinkling feet coming over the crisp short turf, followed by Nero's bounding footsteps and bark.

But the game ended abruptly as a sudden turn in the shrubberies brought the tall, fair-bearded stranger in view.

"Oh! I beg your pardon," exclaimed the same voice, rather shyly; and Hugh took off his hat suddenly in some surprise, for it was no child, but an exceedingly pretty girl, who was looking up in his face with large wondering blue eyes.

"I hope I have not startled you," returned Hugh, courteously, with one of his pleasant smiles. What a diminutive

creature she was; no wonder he had taken her at first sight for a child: her stature was hardly more than a well-grown child of eleven or twelve, and the little white frock and broad-brimmed hat might have belonged to a child too.

But she was a dainty little lady for all that, with a beautifully proportioned figure, as graceful as a fairy, and a most lovely, winsome little face.

"Oh!" she said, with a wonderful attempt at dignity that made him smile—as though he saw a kitten on its best behaviour, "I am not at all startled; but of course Nero and I would hardly have had that race if we had known any one was in the shrubbery. Have you lost your way?" lifting those wonderful Undine-like eyes to his face, which almost startled Hugh with their exceeding beauty and depth.

"Is Nero your dog?" returned Sir Hugh, patting the retriever absently, "he is a fine fellow, only I am afraid he is rather rough sometimes; he nearly knocked you down just now in his play. I see you do not remember me, Miss Mordaunt. I am Sir Hugh Redmond. I have come to call on you and your aunt."

"Oh!" she said, becoming very shy all at once, "I remember you now; but you looked different somehow, and the sun was in my eyes; poor Sir Wilfred,—yes, we heard he was dead,—he came to see Aunt Griselda once before he went away. It must be very lonely for you at the Hall," and she glanced at his deep mourning, and then at the handsome face that was looking so kindly at her. What a grand-looking man he was, she thought; it must have been his beard that altered him so and prevented her from recognising him; but then, of course, she had never seen him since she was a little girl, when her father was alive, and they were living at Wyngate Priory.

Hugh Redmond! ah, yes, she remembered him now. She had made a cowslip ball for him once, and he had tossed it right into the middle of the great elms, where the rooks had their nest, and once she had harnessed him with daisy chains

and driven him up and down the bowling-green, while her father laughed at them from the terrace—what a merry little child she used to be—and Hugh Redmond had been a splendid playfellow; but as she moved beside him down the gravelled walk leading to the cottage her shyness increased, and she could not bring herself to recall these old memories, indeed, Hugh could not get her to look at him again.

"There is Aunt Griselda," she said, suddenly, as a tall lady-like woman with a gentle, subdued-looking face appeared in the porch, and seemed much surprised at Hugh's apparition. "Auntie, Sir Hugh Redmond has come to see us," and then without waiting to see the effect of this introduction on her aunt, Nero's little playfellow slipped away.

Hugh found himself watching for her re-appearance with some anxiety, as he sat in the porch talking to Aunt Griselda.

The elder Miss Mordaunt was somewhat of a recluse in her habits; she was a nervous, diffident woman, who made weak health an excuse for shutting herself out from society. Fay had lived with her ever since her father's death; but during the last year Miss Mordaunt had been much troubled by qualms of conscience, as to whether she was doing her duty to her orphaned niece. Fay was almost a woman, she told herself—a tiny woman certainly, but one must not expect her to grow bigger; girls seldom grew after sixteen, and Fay was more than sixteen. Colonel Mordaunt had left very few instructions in his will about his little daughter. His sister was appointed her personal guardian until she came of age or married; there was a liberal allowance for maintenance and education; but Colonel Mordaunt was a man of simple habits, and Fay had never been accustomed to either ostentation or luxury; one day she would be a rich woman, and find herself the possessor of a large, rambling, old house; until then her father had been perfectly willing that she should live quietly with his sister in her modest cottage at Daintree. Masters and mistresses came over to Fay, and taught her in the low bow-

windowed room that was set apart for her use. A chestnut pony was sent from Wyngate Priory; and Miss Mordaunt's groom accompanied Fay in these long scrambling rides.

The young heiress was perfectly happy and content with her simple secluded life; Aunt Griselda would hear the girl warbling like a lark in her little room. Long before the inhabitants of the cottage would be stirring Fay's little feet were accustomed to brush the dew from the grass; Nero and she would return from their rambles in the highest spirits; the basket of wild flowers that graced the breakfast-table had been all gathered and arranged by Fay's pretty fingers. After breakfast there were all her pets to visit,—to feed the doves and chickens and canaries,—to give Fairy her corn, and to look after the brindled cow and the dear little grey-and-black kitten in the hay-loft—all the live things on the premises loved their gracious little mistress; even Sulky, Aunt Griselda's old pony—the most ill-conditioned and stubborn of ponies, who never altered his pace for any degree of coaxing—would whinny with pleasure if Fay entered his stall.

Fay was very docile with her masters and mistresses, but it is only fair to say that her abilities were not above the average. She sipped knowledge carelessly when it came in her way, but she never sought it of her own accord. Neither she nor Aunt Griselda were intellectual women. Fay played a little, sang charmingly, filled her sketch-book with unfinished vigorous sketches, chattered a little French, and then shut up her books triumphantly, under the notion that at sixteen a girl's education must be finished.

It must be confessed that Miss Mordaunt was hardly the woman to be entrusted with a girl's education. She was a gentle, shallow creature, with narrow views of life, very prim and puritanical,—orthodox, she would have called it,—and she brought up Fay in the old-fashioned way in which she herself had been brought up. Fay never mixed with young people; she had no companions of her own age; but people were be-

ginning to talk of her in the neighbourhood. Fay's youth, her prospective riches, her secluded nun-like life, surrounded her with a certain mystery of attraction. Miss Mordaunt had been much exercised of late by the fact that one or two families in the environs of Daintree had tried to force themselves into intimacy with the ladies of the cottage; sundry young men, too, had made their appearance in the little church at Daintree, as it seemed with the express intention of staring at Fay. One of these, Frank Lumsden, had gone farther—he had taken advantage of a service he had rendered the ladies, when Sulky had been more intractable than usual, to join Fay in her walks and rides. He was a handsome boy of about twenty, and he was honestly smitten with the young heiress's sweet face; but Aunt Griselda, who knew her brother's wish, had been greatly alarmed, and had thought of shutting up her cottage and taking Fay to Bath for the winter before Frank Lumsden came back to Daintree Hall for the Christmas vacation.

Aunt Griselda received Sir Hugh graciously, and prosed gently to him of his father's death; but Hugh turned the conversation skilfully to herself and Fay. He managed to extract a good deal of information from the simple woman about her lovely little niece. Miss Mordaunt could be garrulous on the subject of Fay's perfections—she looked upon Hugh Redmond as the suitor whom her brother would have chosen. Before long Hugh heard all about Frank Lumsden's enormities. Before he had visited many times at the cottage Aunt Griselda had confided her perplexities to his ear, and had asked his advice —of course he had commended her wisdom in driving the unlucky Frank from the field.

"It would never do, you know; he is only a boy," Aunt Griselda observed plaintively; "and Fay will be so rich one of these days."

"Oh! it would never do at all," responded Hugh, hastily. The idea of Frank Lumsden annoyed him. What business had all these impertinent fellows to be staring at Fay in church?

He should like to send them all about their own business, he thought; for though hardly a week had passed, Hugh was beginning to feel a strong interest in Fay.

He had not spoken to her again on that first visit, but after a time she had joined them in the porch, and had sat down demurely by Aunt Griselda, and had busied herself with some work. Hugh could not make her speak to him, but he had a good look at her.

She had laid aside her broad-brimmed hat, and he saw the beautiful little head was covered with soft curly brown hair, that waved naturally over the temples. It was coiled gracefully behind, but no amount of care or pains could have smoothed those rippling waves.

He wished more than once that he could have seen her eyes again, but she kept them fixed on her embroidery; only when anything amused her a charming dimple showed on one cheek. It was the prettiest dimple he had ever seen, and he caught himself trying to say something that would bring it again. Hugh paid a long visit, and in a few days he came again. He was staying at Cooksley, he told them carelessly; and if they would allow it, he added courteously, he should like to walk over to Daintree and see them sometimes.

Miss Mordaunt gave him gracious permission, and Fay looked shyly pleased; and so it came that Hugh called daily at the cottage.

He sent for his horses presently, and drove Miss Mordaunt and her niece to all the beautiful spots in the neighbourhood; and he joined Fay in her canters through the lanes, and found fault with Fairy, much to her little mistress's dismay; but Fay blushed very prettily when one day a beautiful little chestnut mare, with a lady's side-saddle, was brought to the cottage door, where Fay was waiting in her habit.

"I want you to try Bonnie Bell," he said, carelessly, as he put her on her saddle. "You ride perfectly, and Fairy is not half good enough for you;" and Fay was obliged to own that

she had never had such a ride before; and Hugh had noticed that people had turned round to look at the beautiful little figure on the chestnut mare.

"I shall bring her every day for you to ride—she is your own property, you know," Hugh said, as he lifted Fay to the ground; but Fay had only tried to hide her blushing face from his meaning look, and had run into the house.

Hugh was beginning to make his intentions very clear. When he walked with Fay in the little lane behind the cottage he did not say much, but he looked very kindly at her. The girl's innocent beauty—her sweet face and fresh ripple of talk—came soothingly to the jaded man. He began to feel an interest in the gentle unsophisticated little creature. She was very young, very ignorant, and childish,—she had absolutely no knowledge of the world or of men,—but somehow her very innocence attracted him.

His heart was bitter against his old love—should he take this child to himself and make her his wife? He was very lonely—restless, and dissatisfied, and miserable; perhaps, after all, she might rest and comfort him. He was already very fond of her; by and by, when he had learnt to forget Margaret, when he ceased to remember her with these sickening throbs of pain, he might even grow to love her.

"She is so young—so little will satisfy her," he said to himself, when a chill doubt once crossed his mind whether he could ever give her the love that a woman has a right to demand from the man who offers himself as her husband; but he put away the thought from him. He was a Redmond, and it was his duty to marry; he had grown very fond of the shy gentle little creature; he could make her happy, for the child liked him, he thought; and it would be pleasant to have her bright face to welcome him when he went home.

So one evening, as they walked up and down the shrubbery, while Aunt Griselda knitted in the porch, Hugh took Fay's hand, and asked her gently if she thought she could love him

well enough to be his wife. Poor simple little child! she hardly knew how to answer him; but Hugh, who had caught a glimpse of the happy blushing face, was very gentle and patient with her shyness, and presently won from her the answer he wanted. She did like him,—so much he understood her to say,—he was so kind, and had given her so much pleasure. Yes—after much pressing on Hugh's part—she was sure that she liked him well enough, but she could not be induced to say more.

But Hugh was quite content with his victory; he wanted no words to tell him that Fay adored him from the depths of her innocent heart; he could read the truth in those wonderful eyes—Fay had no idea how eloquent they were.

"How could she help loving him?" she said to herself that night, as she knelt down in the moonlight; had she ever seen any one like him. No little imprisoned princess ever watched her knight more proudly than Fay did when Hugh rode away on his big black mare. He was like a king, she thought, so kind, and handsome, and gracious; and Fay prayed with tears that she might be worthy of the precious gift that had come to her.

And so one lovely August day, when Aunt Griselda's sunny little garden was sweet with the breath of roses and camelias, Sir Hugh and Fay were married in the little church at Daintree, and as Hugh looked down on his child-wife, something like compunction seized him, and from the depths of his sore heart he solemnly promised that he would keep his vow, and would cherish and love her, God helping, to his life's end.

CHAPTER VI

BEULAH PLACE

"Upon her face there was the tint of grief,
The settled shadow of an inward strife."
BYRON.

. . . . . "A sorrow not, a son."
ALGERNON C. SWINBURNE.

IN one of the dingiest suburbs of London there is a small plot of ground known by the name of the Elysian Fields; but how it had ever acquired this singular appellation is likely to remain an unsolved problem to the end of time.

Most probably those great satirists, street denominators, had branded it with this title in ridicule, for anything farther removed from the mythological meadows could not possibly be conceived, even by the most sanguine temperament. True, there was a market garden or two, and odours redolent of decaying vegetables; but, on the whole, it was rather an unsavoury region, and much frequented by the costermonger and fishwoman.

The Elysian Fields were divided and sub-divided into streets, rows, and alleys; some respectable, others semi-genteel, but in most cases to be defined by the three degrees of comparison—dingy, dingier, most dingy; and it was under the comparative degree that a certain street, known by the name of Beulah Place, must be classed.

It was a long narrow street, not differing much from the others that ran parallel with it, except in a general air of retire-

ment and obscurity, owing to a "No Thoroughfare" placarded up on the blank wall of a brewery, which had rather a depressing effect on the end houses that looked full on it.

There was little that was noticeable about the street except its name—for here again the satirists had sharpened their wits, and Beulah Place looked down in conscious superiority on Paradise Row.

In conscious superiority indeed—for had not Beulah Place this distinction, that its houses were garnished with imposing flights of steps and a railed-in area, while Paradise Row opened its doors directly on the pavement?

Therefore Beulah Place noted itself eminently respectable, and put on airs; let its front and back parlours to single gentlemen or widows; and looked over its wire blinds in superb disdain at the umbrella-mender, or genteel dressmaker who lived opposite.

At the extreme corner of Beulah Place, with its one glass eye peering down High Street, was Mrs. Watkins, tea merchant and Italian warehouseman—at least, so ran the gilt-lettered inscription, which had been put up over the door in the days of her predecessor, and had remained there ever since. But it was in reality an all-sorts shop, where nearly everything edible could be procured, and to betray ignorance of Mrs. Watkins was to betray ignorance not only of Beulah Place, but of the whole of the Elysian Fields.

To be sure the long window aided the deception, and was fitted up solely with goods in the grocery line; but enter the dark low doorway, and get an odorous whiff from within, and one's olfactory nerves would soon convince one of the contrary.

There was a flavour of everything there; a blended fragrance compounded of strong cheese, herrings, and candles, with a suspicion of matches and tarred wood, which to the uninitiated was singularly unpalatable, and suggested to them to shake off the dust of Mrs. Watkins as soon as possible.

To be sure this was only a trifle. To do her justice, Mrs.

Watkins drove a very thriving trade; the very carters had a partiality for the shop, and would lurch in about twelve o'clock, with their pipes and hob-nailed boots, for a twist of tobacco or a slice of cheese, and crack clumsy jokes across the counter.

But, besides this, Mrs. Watkins had another source of profit that was at once lucrative and respectable. She let lodgings.

And very genteel lodgings they were, with a private entrance in Beulah Place, and a double door that excluded draughts and the heterogeneous odours from the shop.

These lodgers of Mrs. Watkins were the talk of the neighbourhood, and many a passer-by looked curiously up at the bright windows and clean white curtains, between which in summer time bloomed the loveliest flowers, and the earliest snowdrops and crocuses in spring, in the hope of seeing two fair faces which had rather haunted their memory ever since they had first seen them.

It was six o'clock on the evening of a dreary November day. Watkins's shop was empty, for the fog and the rawness and the cold had driven folks early to their homes; and Mrs. Watkins herself, fortified with strong tea and much buttered toast, was entering her profits on a small greasy slate, and casting furtive glances every now and then into the warm, snug parlour, where her nephew and factotum Tony was refreshing himself in his turn from the small black teapot on the hob.

A fresh, wholesome-looking woman was Mrs. Watkins, with an honest, reliable face and a two-fold chin; but she had two peculiarities,—she always wore the stiffest and cleanest and most crackling of print dresses, and her hair was nearly always pinned up in curl-papers under her black cap. Mrs. Watkins was engaged in jotting down small dabs of figures on the slate and rubbing them out again, when the green-baize swing door leading to the passage was pushed back, and a tall grave-looking woman in black entered the shop and quietly approached the counter.

She was certainly a striking-looking person; in spite of the gray hair and a worn, sad expression, the face bore the trace of uncommon beauty, though all youth and freshness, animation and colouring, had faded out of it.

The profile was almost perfect, and the mouth would have been lovely too but for a certain proud droop of the lips which gave an impression of hardness and inflexibility; but the dark eyes were very soft and melancholy, and seemed to hold a world of sadness in their depths.

"Mrs. Watkins," she began hurriedly, in a sweet, cultivated voice, and then stopped and drew back as another person came into the shop; "no, do not let me interrupt you. I was only going to say that one of the young ladies at Miss Martingale's seems very poorly, and Miss Theresa is a little troubled about her, so I have promised to go back for an hour or two; but I have my key with me if I should be late."

"Dear bless my heart, Mrs. Trafford," exclaimed Mrs. Watkins fussily, as she looked at her lodger's pale, tired face, "you are never going out on such an evening, and all the streets swept as clean as if with a new broom; and you with your cough, and the fog, and not to mention the rawness which sucks into your chest like a lozenge;" and here Mrs. Watkins shook her head, and weighed out a quarter of a pound of mixed tea, in a disapproving manner.

Mrs. Trafford smiled. "My good friend," she said, in rather an amused voice, "you ought to know me better by this time; have you ever remembered that either frost, or rain, or fog have kept me indoors a single day when duty called me out;" and here she folded her cloak round her, and prepared to leave the shop.

"It's ill tempting Providence, neighbour," remarked the other woman, who had been standing silently by and now put in her word, for she was an innocent country body with a garrulous tongue; "it's ill tempting Providence, for 'the wind and the sea obey Him.' I had a son myself some four-

teen years next Michaelmas," continued the simple creature, "as brave and bonnie a lad as ever blessed a mother's eyes, and that feared nought; but the snowdrift that swept over the Cumberland Fells found him stumbling and wandering, poor Willie, from the right way, and froze his dear heart dead."

The lady advanced a few steps, and then stopped as though seized by a sudden impulse, and looked wistfully in the other woman's face.

"God help you," she said, very softly; "and was this boy of yours a good son?"

Perhaps in the whole of her simple, sorrowful life Elsie Deans had never seen anything more pathetic than that white face from which the gray hair was so tightly strained, and those anxious questionings. "And was this boy of yours," she said, "a good son?"

"A better never breathed," faltered poor Elsie, as she drew her hand across her eyes; "he was my only bairn, was Willie."

"Why do you weep then?" returned Mrs. Trafford in her sad voice; "do you not know that there are mothers in the heart of this great city who would that their sons had never been born, or that they had seen them die in their infancy. 'He was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow,'" she continued to herself; then aloud, and with a strange flickering smile that scarcely lighted up the pale face, "Good-night to you—happy mother whose son perished on the Cumberland Fells, for you will soon meet him again. Good-night, Mrs. Watkins;" and with this abrupt adieu she went quickly out of the shop and was lost in the surrounding fog.

"A fine figure of a woman," ejaculated Elsie, shaking her old head with a puzzled look on her wrinkled face; "a fine, grand figure of a woman, but surely an 'innocent,' neighbour?"

"An innocent!" repeated Mrs. Watkins with an indignant snort; "an innocent! Mrs. Deans; why should such an idea enter your head? a shrewder and a brighter woman than my

lodger, Mrs. Trafford, never breathed, though folks do say she has had a deal of trouble in her life,—but there, it is none of my business; I never meddle in the affairs of my neighbours. I am not of the sort who let their tongue run away with them," finished Mrs. Watkins with a virtuous toss of her head.

CHAPTER VII

NEA

"She was gay, tender, petulant, and susceptible. All her feelings were quick and ardent; and having never experienced contradiction or restraint, she was little practised in self-control; nothing but the native goodness of her heart kept her from running continually into error."—WASHINGTON IRVING.

IF Mrs. Trafford had been questioned about her past life, she would have replied in patriarchal language that few and evil had been her days, and yet no life had ever opened with more promise than hers.

Many years, nearly a quarter of a century, before the gray-haired weary woman had stood in Mrs. Watkin's shop, a young girl in a white dress, with a face as radiant as the spring morning itself, leant over the balcony of Belgrave House to wave good-bye to her father as he rode away eastward.

Those who knew Nea Huntingdon in those early days say that she was wonderfully beautiful.

There was a picture of her in the Royal Academy, a dark-haired girl in a velvet dress, sitting under a marble column with a blaze of oriental scarves at her feet, and a Scotch deer-hound beside her, and both face and figure were well-nigh faultless. Nea had lost her mother in her childhood, and she lived alone with her father in the great house that stood at the corner of the square, with its flower-laden balconies and many windows facing the setting sun.

Nea was her father's only child, and all his hopes were centred upon her.

Mr. Huntingdon was an ambitious man; he was more, he was a profound egotist. In his character pride, the love of power, the desire for wealth, were evenly balanced and made subservient to a most indomitable will. Those who knew him well said he was a hard self-sufficient man, one who never forgot an injury or forgave it.

He had been the creator of his own fortunes; as a lad he had come to London with the traditional shilling in his pocket, and had worked his way to wealth, and was now one of the richest merchant princes in the metropolis.

He had married a young heiress, and by her help had gained entrance into society, but she had died a dissatisfied, unhappy woman, who had never gained her husband's heart or won his confidence. In Mr. Huntingdon's self-engrossed nature there was no room for tenderness; he had loved his handsome young wife in a cool temperate fashion, but she had never influenced him, never really comprehended him; his iron will, hidden under a show of courtesy, had repressed her from the beginning of their married life. Perhaps her chief sin in his eyes had been that she had not given him a son; he had accepted his little daughter ungraciously, and for the first few years of her young life he had grievously neglected her.

No mother; left by herself in that great house, with nurses to spoil her and servants to wait on her, the little creature grew up wayward and self-willed; her caprices indulged, her faults and follies laughed at or glossed over by careless governesses.

Nea very seldom saw her father in those days; society claimed him when his business was over, and he was seldom at home. Sometimes Nea, playing in the square garden under the acacias, would look up and see a sombre dark face watching her over the railings, but he would seldom call her to him; but, strange to say, the child worshipped him.

When he rode away in the morning a beautiful little face would be peeping at him through the geraniums on the balcony, a

little dimpled hand would wave confidingly. "Good-bye, papa," she would say in her shrill little voice, but he never heard her; he knew nothing, and cared little, about the lonely child-life that was lived out in the spacious nurseries of Belgrave House.

But, thank Heaven, childhood is seldom unhappy.

Nea laughed and played with the other children in the square garden; she drove out with her governess in the grand open carriage, where her tiny figure seemed almost lost. Nea remembered driving with her mother in that same carriage—a fair tired face had looked down on her smiling.

"Mamma, is not Belgrave House the Palace Beautiful? look how its windows are shining like gold," she had said once. "It is not the Palace Beautiful to me, Nea," replied her mother, quietly. Nea always remembered that sad little speech, and the tears that had come into her mother's eyes. What did it all mean? she wondered; why were the tears so often in her mother's eyes? why did not papa drive with them sometimes? It was all a mystery to Nea.

Nea knew nothing about her mother's heart-loneliness and repressed sympathies; with a child's beautiful faith she thought all fathers were like that. When Colonel Hambleton played with his little daughters in the square garden, Nea watched them curiously, but without any painful comparison. "My papa is always busy, Nora," she said, loftily, to one of the little girls who asked why Mr. Huntingdon never came too; "he rides on his beautiful horse down to the city, nurse says. He has his ships to look after, you know, and sometimes he is very tired."

"Papa is never too tired to play with me and Janie," returned Nora with a wise nod of her head; "he says it rests him so nicely."

Somehow Nea went home not quite so happily that day; a dim consciousness that things were different, that it never rested papa to play with her, oppressed her childish brain; and that evening Nea moped in her splendid nursery, and would not be consoled by her toys or even her birds and

kitten. Presently it came out with floods of tears that Nea wanted her father—wanted him very badly indeed.

"You must not be naughty, Miss Nea," returned nurse, severely, for she was rather out of patience with the child's pettishness; "Mr. Huntingdon has a lot of grand people to dine with him to-night. The carriages will be driving up by and by, and if you are good, you shall go into one of the best bedrooms and look at them." But Nea was not to be pacified by this; the tears ended in a fit of perverse sulking that lasted until bedtime. Nea would neither look at the carriages nor the people; the ice and fruit that had been provided as a treat were pushed angrily away; Nea would not look at the dainties—she turned her flushed face aside and buried it in her pillow. "I want papa," she sobbed, as nurse pulled down the blind and left her.

That night, as Mr. Huntingdon crossed the corridor that led to his bedroom, he was startled by seeing what looked like a mass of blue and white draperies flung across his door, but as he lowered his candlestick he saw it was Nea lying fast asleep, with her head pillowed on her arms, and her dark hair half hiding her face.

"Good heavens! what can nurse be about!" he exclaimed in a shocked voice, as he lifted the child, and carried her back to her bed. Nea stirred drowsily as he moved her, and said, "Dear papa," and one warm arm crept about his neck, but she was soon fast asleep again. Somehow that childish caress haunted Mr. Huntingdon, and he thought once or twice how pretty she had looked. Nurse had assured him that the child must have crept out of bed in her sleep, but Mr. Huntingdon did not feel satisfied, and the next morning, as he was eating his breakfast, he sent for Nea.

She came to him willingly enough, and stood beside him.

"What were you doing, my dear, last night?" he asked kindly as he kissed her. "Did nurse tell you that I found you lying by my bedroom door, and that I carried you back to bed?"

"Yes, papa; but why did you not wake me? I tried not to go to sleep until you came, but I suppose I could not help it."

"But what were you doing?" he asked, in a puzzled tone; "don't you know, Nea, that it was very wrong for a little girl to be out of her bed at that time of night?" But as Mr. Huntingdon spoke he remembered again how sweet the childish face had looked, pillowed on the round dimpled arm.

"I was waiting to see you, papa," replied Nea with perfect frankness; "you are always too busy or too tired to come and see me, you know, and nurse is so cross, and so is Miss Sanderson; they will never let me come and find you; so when nurse came to take away the lamp I pretended to be asleep, and then I crept out of the bed, and went to your door and tried to keep awake."

"Why did you want to see me, Nea?" asked her father, more and more puzzled; it never entered his head that his only child wanted him, and longed for him.

"Oh," she said, looking up at him with innocent eyes that reminded him of her mother, "I always want you, papa, though not so badly as I did yesterday; Colonel Hambleton was playing with Nora and Janie, and Nora said her papa was never too busy to play with them, and that made me cry a little, for you never play with me, do you, papa? and you never look up when I am waving to you from the balcony, and nurse says you don't want to be worried with me, but that is not true, is it, papa?"

"No, no!" but his conscience pricked him as he patted her head and picked out a crimson peach for her. "There, run away, Nea, for I am really in a hurry; if you are a good girl you shall come down and sit with me while I have dinner, for I shall be alone to-night;" and Nea tripped away happily.

From that day people noticed a change in Mr. Huntingdon; he began to take interest in his child, without being demonstrative, for to his cold nature demonstration was impossible; he soon evinced a decided partiality for his daughter's society;

and no wonder, as people said, for she was a most engaging little creature.

By and by she grew absolutely necessary to him, and they were never long apart. Strangers would pause to admire the pretty child on her cream-coloured pony cantering beside the dark, handsome man. Nea always presided now at the breakfast-table; the dimpled hands would carry the cup of coffee round to her father's chair, and lay flowers beside his plate. When he was alone she sat beside him as he ate his dinner, and heard about the ships that were coming across the ocean laden with goodly freights. Nea grew into a beautiful girl presently, and then a new ambition awoke in Mr. Huntingdon's breast. Nea was his only child—with such beauty, talents, and wealth, she would be a match for an earl's son; his heart swelled with pride as he looked at her; he began to cherish dreams of her future that would have amazed Nea. A certain young nobleman had lately made their acquaintance, a handsome simple young fellow, with a very moderate allowance of brains; indeed, in his heart Mr. Huntingdon knew that Lord Bertie Gower was merely a feather-brained boy with a weak vacillating will that had already brought him into trouble.

Mr. Huntingdon was thinking about Lord Bertie Gower as he rode away that spring morning, while Nea waved to him from the balcony; he had looked up at her and smiled, but as he turned away his thoughts were very busy. Yes, Lord Bertie was a fool, he knew that,—perhaps he would not own as much to any one else, certainly not if Lord Bertie became his son-in-law,—but he was well-bred and had plenty of good-nature, and—— Well, young men were all alike, they would have their fling, and he was hardly the man to cast a stone at them. Then he was a good-looking fellow, and girls liked him; and if Nea laughed at him, and said that he was stupid, he could soon convince her that there was no need for her husband to be clever—she was clever enough for both; he would like to see the man, with the exception of himself, who could bend

Nea's will. The girl took after him in that she had not inherited her mother's soft yielding nature—poor Susan, who had loved him so well.

Lord Bertie needed a strong hand; as his son-in-law, Mr. Huntingdon thought that he could keep him in order. The boy was certainly in love with Nea. He must come to an understanding with him. True, he was only a second son; but his brother, Lord Leveson, was still a bachelor, and rather shaky in his health. The family were not as a rule long-lived; they were constitutionally and morally weak; and the old Earl had already had a touch of paralysis. Yes, Mr. Huntingdon thought it would do; and there was Groombridge Hall for sale, he thought he would buy that; it should be his wedding gift—part of the rich dowry that she would bring to her husband.

Mr. Huntingdon planned it all as he rode down to the city that morning, and it never entered his mind what Nea would say to his choice. His child belonged to him. She was part of himself. Hitherto his will had been hers. True, he had denied her nothing; he had never demanded even a trifling sacrifice from her; there was no fear that she would cross his will if he told her seriously that he had set his heart on this marriage; and he felt no pity for the motherless young creature, who in her beauty and innocence appealed so strongly to his protection. In his strange nature love was only another form of pride; his egotism made him incapable of unselfish tenderness.

Nea little knew of the thoughts that filled her father's mind as she watched him fondly until both horse and rider had disappeared.

It was one of those days in the early year when the spring seems to rush upon the world as though suddenly new born, when there is all at once a delicious whisper and rustle of leaves, and the sunshine permeates everything; when the earth wakes up fresh, green, and laden with dews; and soft

breezes, fragrant with the promise of summer, come stealing into the open windows. Nea looked like the embodiment of spring as she stood there in her white gown. Below her was the cool green garden of the square where she had played as a child, with the long morning shadows lying on the grass; around her were the twitterings of the house-martins and the cheeping of sparrows under the eaves; from the distance came the perfumy breath of violets.

Such days make the blood course tumultuously through the veins of youth, when with the birds and all the live young things that sport in the sunshine, they feel that mere existence is a joy and a source of endless gratitude.

"Who so happy as I?" thought Nea, as she tripped through the great empty rooms of Belgrave House, with her hands full of golden primroses; "how delicious it is only to be alive on such a morning."

Alas for that happy spring-tide, for the joyousness and glory of her youth. Little did Nea guess as she flitted, like a white butterfly, from one flower vase to another, that her spring-tide was already over, and that the cloud that was to obscure her life was dawning slowly in the east.

CHAPTER VIII

MAURICE TRAFFORD

"I have no reason than a woman's reason;
I think him so, because I think him so."

SHAKESPEARE.

BEFORE noon there was terror and confusion in Belgrave House. Nea, flitting like a humming-bird from flower to flower, was suddenly startled by the sound of heavy jolting footsteps on the stairs, and, coming out on the corridor, she saw strange men carrying the insensible figure of her father to his room. She uttered a shrill cry and sprang towards them, but a gentleman who was following them put her gently aside, and telling her that he was a doctor, and that he would come to her presently, quietly closed the door.

Nea, sitting on the stairs and weeping passionately, heard from a sympathising bystander the little there was to tell.

Mr. Huntingdon had met with an accident in one of the crowded city lanes. His horse had shied at some passing object and had thrown him—here Nea uttered a low cry—but that was not all.

His horse had flung him at the feet of a very Juggernaut, a mighty waggon piled with wool bales nearly as high as a house. One of the leaders had backed on his haunches at the unexpected obstacle; but the other, a foolish young horse, reared, and in another moment would certainly have trodden out the brains of the insensible man, had not a youth—a mere boy—

suddenly rushed from the crowded footpath and threw himself full against the terrified animal, so for one brief instant retarding the movement of the huge waggon while Mr. Huntingdon was dragged aside.

It had all happened in a moment; the next moment the horses were plunging and rearing, with the driver swearing at them, and the young man had sunk on a truck white as death, and faint from the pain of his sprained arm and shoulder.

"Who is he?" cried Nea, impetuously, "what have they done with him?"

He was in the library, the butler informed her. The doctor had promised to dress his shoulder after he had attended to Mr. Huntingdon. No, his mistress need not go down, Wilson went on; it was only Mr. Trafford, one of the junior clerks. Only a junior clerk! Nea flashed an indignant look as Wilson spoke. What if he were the city-messenger; her father should make his fortune, and she would go and thank him. But there was no time for this, for the same grave-looking doctor who had closed her father's door against her was now standing on the threshold; and Nea forgot everything in her gratitude and joy as he told her that, though severely injured, Mr. Huntingdon was in no danger, and with quiet and rest, and good nursing, he would soon be himself again. It would all depend on her, he added, looking at the agitated girl in a fatherly manner; and he bade her dry her eyes and look as cheerful as she could, that she might not disturb Mr. Huntingdon. Nea obeyed him; she choked down her sobs resolutely, and with a strange paleness on her young face, stole into the darkened room and stood beside him.

"Well, Nea," observed her father, huskily, as she took his hand and kissed it; "I have had a narrow escape; another instant and it would have been all over with me. Is Wilson there?"

"Yes, papa," answered Nea, still holding his hand to her cheek, as she knelt beside him; and the grey-haired butler stepped up to the bed.

"Wilson, let Stephenson know that he is to get rid of Gypsy at once. She has been a bad bargain to me, and this trick of hers might have cost me my life."

"You are not going to sell Gypsy, papa," exclaimed the girl, forgetting the doctor's injunctions in her dismay; "not your own beautiful Gypsy?"

"I never allow people or animals to offend me twice, Nea. It is not the first time Gypsy has played this trick on me. Let Stephenson see to it at once. I will not keep her. Tell him to let Uxbridge see her, he admired her last week; he likes spirit and will not mind a high figure, and he knows her pedigree."

"Yes, sir," replied Wilson.

"By the bye," continued Mr. Huntingdon, feebly, "some one told me just now about a youth who had done me a good turn in the matter. Did you hear his name, Wilson?"

"Yes, papa," interrupted Nea, eagerly; "it was Mr. Trafford, one of the junior clerks, and he is downstairs in the library, waiting for the doctor to dress his shoulder."

Nea would have said more, for her heart was full of gratitude to the heroic young stranger; but her father held up his hand deprecatingly, and she noticed that his face was very pale.

"That will do, my dear. You speak too fast, and my poor head is still painful and confused;" and as Nea looked distressed at her thoughtlessness, he continued, kindly, "Never mind, Dr. Ainslie says I shall be all right soon—he is going to send me a nurse. Trafford, you say; that must be Maurice Trafford, a mere junior. Let me see, what did Dobson say about him?" and Mr. Huntingdon lay and pondered with that hard set face of his, until he had mastered the facts that had escaped his memory.

"Ah, yes, the youngest clerk but one in the office; a curate's son from Birmingham, an orphan,—no mother,—and drawing a salary of seventy pounds a year. Dobson told me about him; a nice, gentlemanly lad; works well—he seems to have taken a fancy to him. He is an old fool is Dobson, and full of vagaries,

but a thoroughly good man of business. He said Trafford was a fellow to be trusted, and would make a good clerk by and by. Humph, a rise will not hurt him. One cannot give a diamond ring to a boy like that. I will tell Dobson to-morrow to raise Trafford's salary to a hundred a year."

"Papa," burst from Nea's lips as she overheard this muttered soliloquy, but, as she remembered the doctor's advice, she prudently remained quiet; but if any one could have read her thoughts at that moment, could have known the oppression of gratitude in the heart of the agitated girl toward the stranger who had just saved her father from a horrible death, and whose presence of mind and self-forgetfulness were to be repaid by the paltry sum of thirty pounds a year! "Papa," she exclaimed, and then in her forbearance kept quiet.

"Ah, Nea, are you there still?" observed her father in some surprise; "I do not want to keep you a prisoner, my child. Wilson can sit by me while I sleep, for I must not be disturbed after I have taken the composing draught Dr. Ainslie ordered. Go out for a drive and amuse yourself; and, wait a moment, Nea, perhaps you had better say a civil word or two to young Trafford, and see if Mrs. Thorpe has attended to him. He shall hear from me officially to-morrow; yes," muttered Mr. Huntingdon as his daughter left the room, "a hundred a year is an ample allowance for a junior, more than that would be ill-advised and lead to presumption."

Maurice Trafford was in the library trying to forget the pain of his injured arm, which was beginning to revenge itself for that moment's terrible strain.

The afternoon's shadows lay on the garden of the square, the children were playing under the acacia trees, the house-martins still circled and wavered in the sunlight.

Through the open window came the soft spring breezes and the distant hum of young voices; within was warmth, silence, and the perfume of violets.

Maurice closed his drowsy eyes with a delicious sense of

luxurious forgetfulness, and then opened them with a start; for some one had gently called him by his name, and for a moment he thought it was still his dream, for standing at the foot of the couch was a girl as beautiful as any vision, who held out her hand to him, and said in the sweetest voice he had ever heard :

"Mr. Trafford, you have saved my father's life. I shall be grateful to you all my life."

Maurice was almost dizzy as he stood up and looked at the girl's earnest face and eyes brimming over with tears, and the sunlight and the violets and the children's voices seemed all confused; and as he took her offered hand a strange shyness kept him silent.

"I have heard all about it," she went on. "I know, while others stood by too terrified to move, you risked your own life to protect my father—that you stood between him and death while they dragged him out from the horses' feet. It was noble—heroic;" and here Nea clasped her hands, and the tears ran down her cheeks.

Poor impetuous child; these were hardly the cold words of civility that her pompous father had dictated, and were to supplement the thirty pounds per annum, "officially delivered." Surely, as she looked at the young man in his shabby coat, she must have remembered that it was only Maurice Trafford the junior clerk—the drudge of a mercantile house.

Nea owned afterwards that she had forgotten everything; in after years she confessed that Maurice's grave young face came upon her like a revelation.

She had admirers by the score,—the handsome weak-minded Lord Bertie among them,—but never had she seen such a face as Maurice Trafford's the poor curate's son.

Maurice's pale face flushed up under the girl's enthusiastic praise, but he answered very quietly :

"I did very little, Miss Huntingdon; any one could have done as much. How could I stand by and see your father's

danger, and not go to his help?" and then, as the intolerable pain in his arm brought back the faintness, he asked her permission to reseat himself. "He would go home," he said, wearily, "and then he need trouble no one."

Nea's heart was full of pity for him. She could not bear the thought of his going back to his lonely lodgings, with no one to take care of him, but there was no help for it. So Mrs. Thorpe was summoned with her remedies, and the carriage was ordered. When it came round Maurice looked up in his young hostess's face with his honest grey eyes and frank smile and said good-bye. And the smile and the grey eyes, and the touch of the thin boyish hand, were never to pass out of Nea's memory from that day.

* * * * *

The shadows grew longer and longer in the gardens of the square, the house-martins twitted merrily about their nests, the flower girls sat on the area steps with their baskets of roses and jonquils, when Mr. Huntingdon laid aside his invalid habits and took up his old life again, far too soon, as the doctors said who attended him. His system had received a severer shock than they had first imagined, and they recommended Baden-Baden and perfect rest for some months.

But as well might they have spoken to the summer leaves that were swirling down the garden paths, as move Mr. Huntingdon from his usual routine. He only smiled incredulously, said that he felt perfectly well, and rode off every morning eastward on the new grey mare that had replaced Gypsy.

And Nea flitted about the room among her birds and flowers, and wondered sometimes if she should ever see Maurice Trafford again. While Maurice, on his side, drudged patiently on, very happy and satisfied with his sudden rise, and dreaming foolish youthful dreams, and both of them were ignorant, poor children, that the wheel of destiny was revolving a second time to bring them nearer together.

For when November came with its short days, its yellow

fogs, its heavy damp atmosphere, a terrible thing happened in Mr. Huntingdon's office.

A young clerk, the one above Maurice—a weak dissipated fellow, who had lately given great dissatisfaction by his unpunctuality and carelessness—absconded one day with five thousand pounds belonging to his employer. Mr. Huntingdon had just given authority to the manager to dismiss him when the facts of his disappearance and the missing sum were brought to their ears. The deed was a cool one, and so cleverly executed that more than one believed that an older hand was concerned in it; but in the midst of the consternation and confusion, while the manager stood rubbing his hands nervously together, and Mr. Huntingdon, in his cold, hard voice, was giving instructions to the detective, Maurice Trafford quietly asked to speak to him a moment, and offered to accompany the detective officer.

He knew George Anderson's haunts, he said, and from a chance word accidentally overheard, he thought he had a clue, and might succeed in finding him.

There was something so modest and self-reliant in the young man's manner as he spoke, that, after a searching glance at him, Mr. Huntingdon agreed to leave the matter in his hands, only bidding him not to let the young villain escape, as he certainly meant to punish him.

Many were the incidents that befell Maurice and his companion in this his first and last detective case; but at last, thanks to his sagacity and the unerring instinct of the officer, they were soon on the right track, and before night had very far advanced were hanging about a low public-house in Liverpool, lurking round corners and talking to stray sailors.

And the next morning they boarded the *Washington*, bound for New York, that was to loose anchor at the turn of the tide; and while Staunton, the detective, was making inquiries of the captain about the steerage passengers, Maurice's sharp eyes had caught sight of a young sailor with a patch over his eye, appar-

ently busy with a coil of ropes, and he walked up to him carelessly; but as he loitered at his side a moment his manner changed.

"Don't look round, George," he whispered; "for heaven's sake keep to the ropes or you are lost. Slip the pocket-book in my hand, and I will try and get the detective out of the boat."

"Would it be penal servitude, Maurice?" muttered the lad, and his face turned a ghastly hue at the thought of the human bloodhound behind him.

"Five or ten years at least," returned Maurice. "Were you mad, George? Give it to me—quick—quick! and I will put him on the wrong scent. That's right," as the shaking hands pushed a heavy brown pocket-book towards him. "Good-bye, George; say your prayers to-night, and thank God that you are saved."

"Staunton," he said aloud, as the detective approached him, "we are wrong; he is in the bow of the *Brown Bess*, and he sails in the *Prairie Flower;*" and as he uttered the first lie that he had ever told in his guileless young life, Maurice looked full in the detective's face and led him quietly away.

But a couple of hours later—when Staunton was losing his temper over their want of success, and the *Washington* was steaming out of the dock—Maurice suddenly produced the pocket-book, and proposed that they should take the next train back for London. "For I am very tired," finished Maurice, with provoking good-humour; "and Mr. Huntingdon will sleep better to-night if we give him back his five thousand pounds."

"You'll let the rogue go!" exclaimed Staunton, and he swore savagely. "You have cheated justice, and connived at his escape."

"Yes," answered Maurice calmly. "Don't put yourself out, my good fellow. I will take all the blame. He sailed in the *Washington*, and there she goes like a bird. You are out of temper because I was too sharp for you. Evil communications

corrupt good manners, Staunton. I have taken a leaf out of your book—don't you think I should make a splendid detective?" continued Maurice, rattling on in pure boyish fun. "I got up the little fiction about the *Brown Bess* and the *Prairie Flower* when I saw him dressed like a sailor, with a patch over his eye, hauling in the ropes."

Then, as Staunton uttered another oath:

"Why, did you expect me to bring back my old chum, when I knew they would give him five or ten years of penal servitude? Do you think I am flesh and blood and could do it? No! I have kept my promise, and brought back the five thousand pounds, and not a farthing of it would he or you have seen but for me."

Perhaps Staunton was not as hard-hearted as he seemed, for he ceased blustering and shook Maurice's hand very heartily; nay, more, when they told their story, and Mr. Huntingdon frowned angrily on hearing Maurice had connived at the criminal's escape, he spoke up for Maurice. "You did not expect the young gentleman, sir, to put the handcuffs on his old pal; it is against human nature, you see."

"Perhaps so," returned Mr. Huntingdon, coldly; "but I should have thought better of you, Trafford, if you had sacrificed feeling in the matter. Well, it may rest now. I have struck off George Anderson's name as defaulter out of my book and memory, and I will tell Dobson to add his salary to yours. No thanks," he continued in rather a chilling manner, as Maurice's eyes sparkled, and he attempted to speak; "it is a fair recompense for your sagacity. Go on as well as you have begun, and your future will be assured. To-morrow I shall expect you to dine with me at Belgrave House. Dobson is coming, too," and with a slight nod Mr. Huntingdon dismissed him.

That night Maurice laid his head upon his pillow and dreamed happy dreams of a golden future. To-morrow he should see the dark-eyed girl who had spoken so sweetly to him; and

as he remembered her words and glances of gratitude, and the touch of her soft white hands, Maurice's heart gave quick throbs that were almost pain.

He should see that lovely face again, was his first waking thought; but when the evening was over Maurice Trafford went back to his lodgings a sadder and a wiser man.

He was dazzled and bewildered when he saw her again—the young girl in the white gown was changed into a radiant princess. Nea was dressed for a ball; she came across the great lighted room to greet Maurice in a cloud of gauzy draperies. Diamonds gleamed on her neck and arms; her eyes were shining; she looked so bewilderingly beautiful that Maurice grew embarrassed, all the more that Mr. Huntingdon's cold eyes were upon him.

Maurice never recalled that evening without pain. A great gulf seemed to open between him and his master's daughter; what was there in common between them? Nea talked gaily to him as well as to her other guests, but he could hardly bring himself to answer her.

His reserve disappointed Nea. She had been longing to see him again, but the handsome young clerk seemed to have so little to say to her. He was perfectly gentlemanly and well bred, but he appeared somewhat depressed.

Nea's vanity was piqued at last, and when Lord Bertie joined them in the evening she gave him all her attention. Things had not progressed according to Mr. Huntingdon's wishes. Nea could not be induced to look favourably on Lord Bertie's suit; she pouted and behaved like a spoilt child when her father spoke seriously to her on the subject. The death of one of Lord Bertie's sisters had put a stop to the wooing for the present; but it was understood that he would speak to Nea very shortly, and after a long and angry argument with her father, she was induced to promise that she would listen to him.

Nea was beginning to feel the weight of her father's inflexible will. In spite of her gaiety and merry speeches, she was

hardly happy that evening. Lord Bertie's heavy speeches and meaningless jokes oppressed her—how terribly weary she would get of him if he were her husband, she thought. She was tired of him already—of his commonplace handsome face—of his confidential whispers and delicately-implied compliments—and then she looked up and met Maurice's thoughtful grey eyes fixed on her. Nea never knew why she blushed, or a strange restless feeling came over her that moment; but she answered Lord Bertie pettishly. It was almost a relief when the carriage was announced, and she was to leave her guests. Maurice, who was going, stood at the door while Lord Bertie put her in the carriage—a little gloved hand waved to him out of the darkness—and then the evening was over.

Mr. Huntingdon had not seemed like himself that night; he had complained of headache and feverishness, and had confided to Dobson that perhaps after all Dr. Ainslie was right, and he ought to have taken more rest.

Somehow he was not the man he had been before his accident; nevertheless he ridiculed the idea that much was amiss, and talked vaguely of running down to the sea for a few days.

But not even that determined will of his could shake off the illness that was creeping over him, and one night when Nea returned from a brilliant *réunion* she found Belgrave House a second time in confusion. Mr. Huntingdon had been taken suddenly ill, and Dr. Ainslie was in attendance.

By and by a nurse arrived—a certain bright-eyed little Sister Teresa—and took charge of the sick man. After the first few days of absolute danger, during which he had been tolerably submissive, Mr. Huntingdon had desired that he should be kept informed of all matters connected with an important law-suit of his at present pending; and during the tedious weeks of convalescence Maurice Trafford carried the daily report to Belgrave House. It seemed as though fate were conspiring against him; every day he saw Nea, and every day her presence grew more perilously sweet to him.

She had a thousand innocent pretexts for detaining him, little girlish coquetries which she did not employ in vain. She would ask him about her father, or beg him to tell her about the tiresome law-suit, or show him her birds and flowers, anything, in fact, that her caprice could devise to keep him beside her for a moment; very often they met in her father's room, or Mr. Huntingdon would give orders that Mr. Trafford should stay to luncheon.

Nea, in her blindness, thought she was only amusing herself with an idle fancy, a girl's foolish partiality for a face that seemed almost perfect in her eyes; she little thought that she was playing a dangerous game, that the time was fast approaching when she would find her fancy a sorrowful reality.

Day by day those stolen moments became more perilous in their sweetness; and one morning Nea woke up to the conviction that Maurice Trafford loved her, that he was everything to her, and that she would rather die than live without him.

It was one afternoon, and they were together in the drawing-room. Maurice had come late that day, and a violent storm had set in, and Mr. Huntingdon had sent down word that Mr. Trafford had better wait until it was over. To do Mr. Huntingdon justice, he had no idea his daughter was in the house; she had gone out to luncheon, and he had not heard of her return.

The heavy velvet curtains had been drawn to shut out the dreary scene, and only the firelight lit up the room; Nea, sitting in her favourite low chair, with her feet on the white rug, was looking up at Maurice, who stood leaning against the mantelpiece talking to her.

He was telling her about his father's early death, and of the sweet-faced mother who had not long survived him; of his own struggles and poverty, of his lonely life, his efforts to follow his parents' example. Nea listened to him in silence; but once he paused, and the words seemed to die on his lips. He

had never seen her look like that before; she was trembling, her face was pale, and her eyes were wet with tears; and then, how it happened neither of them could tell, but Maurice knew that he loved her—knew that Nea loved him—and was holding her to his heart as though he could never let her go.

CHAPTER IX

THE AWAKENING

"That thrilling, solemn, proud, pathetic voice,
He stretched his arms out towards that thrilling voice,
As if to draw it on to his embrace.
I take her as God made her, and as men
Must fail to unmake her, for my honour'd wife."

E. B. BROWNING.

PARADISE itself could hardly hold an hour of purer and more perfect bliss than when those two young creatures stood holding each other's hands and confessing their mutual love.

To Nea it was happiness, the happiness for which she had secretly longed. To Maurice it was a dazzling dream, a madness, an unreality, from which he must wake up to doubt his own sanity—to tremble and disbelieve.

And that awakening came all too soon.

Through the long hours of the night he lay and pondered, till with the silence and darkness a thousand uneasy thoughts arose that cooled the fever in his veins and made him chill with the foreboding of evil.

What had he done? Was he mad? Had it been all his fault that he had betrayed his love? had he not been sorely tempted? and yet, would not a more honourable man have left her without saying a word?

How could he go to Mr. Huntingdon and acknowledge what he had done? that he, a mere clerk, a poor curate's son, had dared to aspire to his daughter, to become the rival of Lord Bertie

Gower—for Nea had confided to him her father's ambition. Would he not think him mad? groaned Maurice, or would he turn with that hard dark look on his face that he knew so well, and give him a curt dismissal?

Maurice remembered George Anderson and trembled, as well he might; and then as the whole hopelessness of the case rushed upon him, he thought that he would tell his darling that he had been mad—dishonourable, but that he would give her up; that he loved her better than himself, and that for her own sweet sake he must give her up.

And so through the long dark hours Maurice lay and fought out his first fierce battle of life, and morning found him the victor.

The victor, but not for long; for at the first hint, the first whispered word that he must tell her father, or that he must leave her for ever, Nea clung to him in a perfect passion of tears.

The self-willed undisciplined child had grown into the wayward undisciplined girl. No one but her father had ever thwarted Nea, and now even his will had ceased to govern her; she could not and would not give up the only man whom she loved; nothing on earth should induce her now to marry Lord Bertie—she would rather die first; if he left her she should break her heart, but he loved her too well to leave her.

Poor Maurice! An honourable man would have nerved himself to bear her loving reproaches; would have turned sadly and firmly from her confused girlish sophistries, and reproved them with a word. He would have told her that he loved her, but that he loved honour more; that he would neither sin himself nor suffer her to tempt him from his sense of right. But Maurice did none of these things; he was young and weak; the temptation was too powerful; he stayed, listened, and was lost. Ah! the angels must have wept that day over Maurice's fall, and Nea's victory.

She told him what he knew already, that Mr. Huntingdon

would turn him out of his office; that he would oppress her cruelly; that he would probably take her abroad, or condemn her to solitude, until she had promised to give him up and marry Lord Bertie.

Could he leave her to her father's tender mercies, or abandon her to that other lover? and she wept so passionately as she said this that a stronger man than Maurice must have felt his strength waver.

And so Nea had the victory, and the days flew by on golden wings, and the stolen moments became sweeter and more precious to the young lovers until the end came.

Mr. Huntingdon was better—he could leave his room and walk up and down the corridor leaning on Sister Teresa's arm.

There was less pain and fewer relapses; and when Dr. Ainslie proposed that his patient should spend the rest of the spring in the south of France, Mr. Huntingdon consented without demur.

They were to be away some months, Mr. Huntingdon informed Nea, and extend their tour to Switzerland and the Italian Tyrol. Lord Bertie had promised to join them at Pau in a month or so, and here her father looked at her with a smile. They could get the trousseau in Paris. Nea must make up her mind to accept him before they started; there must be no more delay or shilly-shallying; the thing had already hung fire too long. Lord Bertie had been complaining that he was not fairly treated, and more to the same purpose.

Nea listened in perfect silence, but it was well that her father could not see her face. Presently she rose and said that he was tired and must talk no more, for Mr. Trafford would be here directly; and then she made some pretext for leaving the room.

Maurice found her waiting for him when he came downstairs. As he took her in his arms, and asked her why she looked so pale and strange, she clung to him almost convul-

sively, and implored him to save her. Maurice was as pale as she long before she had finished; the crisis had come, and he must either lose her or tempt his fate.

Again he tried to reason with her, to be true to himself and her; but Nea would not give him up or let him tell her father. She would marry Maurice at once if he wished it; yes, perhaps that would be the wisest plan. Her father would never give his consent, but when it was too late to prevent it he might be induced to forgive their marriage. It was very wrong, she knew, but it would be the only way to free her from Lord Bertie. Her father would be terribly angry, but his anger would not last; she was his only child, and he had never denied her anything.

Poor Nea! there was something pathetic in her blindness and perfect faith in her father; even Maurice felt his misgiving silenced as he listened to her innocent talk; and again the angels wept over Maurice's deeper fall, and Nea's unholy victory.

They had planned it all; in three weeks' time they were to be married. Mr. Huntingdon could not leave before then. On the day before that fixed for the journey, the bond was to be sealed and signed between them, so that no power of man could part them. Mr. Huntingdon might storm ever so loudly, his anger would break against an adamantine fate. "Those whom God has joined together no man can put asunder"—words of sacred terror and responsibility.

The next three weeks were very troubled ones to Maurice; his brief interviews with Nea were followed by hours of bitter misgivings. But Nea was childishly excited and happy; every day her love for Maurice increased and deepened. The shadow of his moral weakness could not hide his many virtues. She gloried in the thought of being his wife. Oh yes, her father would be good to them; perhaps after all they would go to Pau, but Maurice and not Lord Bertie would be with them.

Nea never hesitated, never repented, though Maurice's face grew thin and haggard with anxiety as the days went by.

They were to be married in one of the old city churches; and afterwards Maurice was to take her to his lodgings in Ampton Street; and they were to write a letter to Mr. Huntingdon. Maurice must help her write it, Nea said. Of course her father would be angry—fearfully angry—but after a few hours he would calm down, and then he would send the carriage for her; and there would be a scene of penitence and reconciliation. Nea painted it all in glowing colours, but Maurice shook his head with a sad smile, and begged her not to deceive herself. Mr. Huntingdon might not forgive them for a long time, for he remembered George Anderson, and the inexorable will that would have condemned the young criminal to penal servitude.

And so one morning as Mr. Huntingdon was sitting by the open window watching the children play in the May sunshine, and wondering why his daughter had not been to wish him good morning, Nea had stolen out of her father's house, and was hurrying through the sunny square and green deserted park until she found Maurice waiting for her, who silently took her hand, and put her into the carriage.

Nea said afterwards that it was that silent greeting of Maurice's, and his cold touch, that first brought a doubt to her mind; during the long drive he spoke little to her—only held her hand tightly; and when at last they stood together in the dark old church with its gloomy altar and white gleaming monuments, the poor child gave a shiver that was almost fear, and suddenly burst into tears. It had come upon her all at once what she was doing, and why she was there; but already it was too late, for while she was clinging to Maurice with low frightened sobs, the curate had hurried from the vestry and had entered within the rails, and the pew opener was beckoning them to take their places.

Too late! too late! Ten minutes more and the knot was

tied that no hand could loosen, and Nea Huntingdon had become Nea Trafford.

* * * * *

But when they had left the gloomy old church in the distance, and were driving through the crowded streets with their babel of voices, Nea's courage and spirits revived; and presently she was tripping about Maurice's shabby rooms, rearranging the bowls of jonquils and lilac, with which the landlady had made some show of festivity, unlooping the stiff folds of the muslin curtains, and peeping into the corner cupboards with the gleeful curiosity of a child, until, at her young husband's gentle remonstrance, her seriousness returned, and she sat down to write the formidable letter.

And how formidable it was Nea never imagined, until she had tried and failed, and then tried again till she sighed for very weariness; and then Maurice came to her aid with a few forcible sentences; and so it got itself written—the saddest, most penitent little letter that a daughter's hand could frame.

But when she had laid down the burthen of her secret, and the special messenger had been despatched to Belgrave House, Nea put off thought for a while, and she sat by the window and chatted to Maurice about the gay doings they would have at Pau, and Maurice listened to her; but always there was that sad incredulous smile on his face.

And so the day wore on, but when they had finished their simple dinner and the afternoon had waned into evening, Nea grew strangely quiet and Maurice's face grew graver and graver as they sat with clasped hands in the twilight, with a barrier of silence growing up between them.

And when the dusk became darkness, and the lamp was brought in, Nea looked at Maurice with wide anxious eyes and asked what it meant.

Were they not going to send the carriage for them after all? she wondered; must she go home on foot and brave her

father's anger? he must be so very, very angry, she thought, to keep them so long in suspense.

"Hush!" exclaimed Maurice, and then they heard the rumbling of wheels that stopped suddenly before the door, and the loud pealing of a bell through the house.

"The carriage! the carriage!" cried Nea, and the flush rose to her face as she started to her feet, but Maurice did not answer; he was grasping the table to support himself, and felt as though another moment's suspense would be intolerable.

"A letter for Mrs. Trafford," observed the landlady in solemn awe-struck tones, "and a man in livery and the cabman are bringing in some boxes."

"What boxes?" exclaimed Nea, but as she tore open the letter and glanced over the contents a low cry escaped her.

"Maurice! Maurice!" cried the poor child, and Maurice taking it from her, read it once, twice, thrice, growing whiter and whiter with each perusal, and then sank on a chair, hiding his face in his hands, with a groan. "Oh! my darling," he gasped, "I have ruined you; my darling, for whom I would willingly have died, I have ruined and brought you to beggary."

They had sinned, and beyond doubt their sin was a heavy one; but what father, if he had any humanity, could have looked at those two desolate creatures, so young, and loving each other so tenderly, and would not have had pity on them?

The letter was as follows:—

"MADAM—I am directed by Mr. Huntingdon to inform you that from this day he will hold no communication with you or your husband.

"He wishes me to add that he has sent all clothes, jewels, and personal effects belonging to his daughter Nea Huntingdon, now styling herself Nea Trafford, to the enclosed address, and he has directed his manager, Mr. Dobson, to strike Mr. Maurice Trafford's name from the list of clerks. Any attempts

to open any further correspondence with Mr. Huntingdon will be useless, as all such letters will be returned or destroyed.

I remain, Madam, Your humble servant,

SISTER TERESA."

Enclosed was a cheque for two hundred pounds and a little slip of paper with a few pencilled lines in Sister Teresa's handwriting.

"For the love of heaven do not send or come—it would be worse than useless, he is nearly beside himself with anger; your maid interceded for you with tears, and has been sent away with her wages. No one dares to say a word."

Oh fathers! provoke not your children to wrath. It was that hard, cruel letter that changed Nea's repentance to unrelenting bitterness.

Instinctively she felt the iron of her father's will enter into her soul. In a moment she understood, as she had never done before, the hardness and coldness of his nature, the inflexibility of his purpose; as well might she dash herself against a rock as expect forgiveness. Well, she was his own child, her will was strong too, and in the anguish of her despair she called upon her pride to support her, she leant her fainting woman's heart upon that most rotten of reeds.

He had disinherited her, his only child, he had flung her away from him. Well, she would defy him; and then she remembered his ill-health, their projected trip to Pau, their happy schemes for the future, till her heart felt almost broken, but for all that she stood like a statue, crushing down the pain in the very stubbornness of her pride.

Ah, Nea, unhappy Nea! poor motherless, wilful girl; well may she look round her with that scared, hunted look.

Was this her future home, these poor rooms, this shabby furniture? Belgrave House closed to her for ever. But as she looked round with that fixed miserable glance, why did the tears suddenly dim her eyes?

Her glance had fallen on Maurice, still sitting motionless with his hands before his eyes—Maurice her husband; yes, there he sat, the man whom her own wilfulness had dragged to the brink of ruin, whose faith and honour she had tempted, whose honest purpose she had shaken and destroyed, who was so crushed with remorse for his own weakness that he dare not look her in the face; and as she gazed at him, Nea's whole heart yearned with generous pity over the man who had brought her to poverty, but whom she loved and would love to her life's end.

And Maurice, sitting crushed with that awful remorse, felt his hands drawn down from his face, and saw Nea's beautiful face smiling at him through her tears, felt the smooth brown head nestle to his breast, and heard the low sobbing words—

"For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, till death us do part, have I not promised, Maurice? take me to your heart and comfort me with your love, for in all the world I have no one but you—no one but you!"

CHAPTER X

IN DEEP WATERS

"Let our unceasing, earnest prayer
Be, too, for light, for strength to bear
Our portion of the weight of care,
That crushes into dumb despair
One half the human race.

O suffering, sad humanity!
O ye afflicted ones, who lie
Steep'd to the lips in misery,
Longing, and yet afraid to die,
Patient though sorely tried!
I pledge you in this cup of grief,
Where floats the fennel's bitter leaf!
The battle of our life is brief,
The alarm, the struggle, the relief;
Then sleep we side by side.

LONGFELLOW.

NEA had to learn by bitter experience that the fruits of disobedience and deceit are like the apples of Sodom, fair to the sight, but mere ashes to the taste, and in her better mood she owned that her punishment was just.

Slowly and laboriously, with infinite care and pains, she set herself to unlearn the lessons of her life. For wealth she had poverty; for ease and luxury, privation and toil; but in all her troubles her strong will and pride sustained her; and though she suffered, and heaven only knew how she suffered! she never complained or murmured until the end came.

For her pride sustained her, and when that failed, her love came to her aid.

How she loved him, how she clung to him in those days, no one but Maurice knew; in her bitterest hours his words had power to comfort her and take the sting from her pain. When it was possible, she hid her troubles from him, and never added to his by vain repinings and regrets.

But in spite of Nea's courage and Maurice's patience, they had a terribly hard life of it.

At first Maurice's efforts to find another clerkship were in vain, and they were compelled to live on the proceeds of the cheque; then Nea sold her jewels, that they might have something to fall back upon. But presently Mr. Dobson came to their aid.

He had a large family, and could not do much, as he told them, sorrowfully; but he found Maurice, with some trouble, a small clerkship at eighty pounds a year, advising him at the same time to eke out their scanty income by taking in copying work of an evening.

Indeed, as Maurice discovered many a time in his need, he did not want a friend as long as the good manager lived.

And so those two young creatures took up the heavy burden of their life, and carried it with tolerable patience and courage; and as in the case of our first parents, exiled by a woman's weakness from the fair gardens of Paradise, so, though they reaped thorns and thistles, and earned their bread by the sweat of their brow, yet the bitter-sweet memories of their lost Eden abode with them, and in their poverty they tasted many an hour of pure unsullied love.

For they were young, and youth's courage is high, and the burden of those days was not yet too hard to be borne.

Nea longed to help Maurice, but her pride, always her chief fault, came as a stumbling-block in her way; she could not bear to go into the world and face strangers. And Maurice on his side could not endure the thought that his beautiful young wife should be exposed to slights and humiliations; so Nea's fine talents wasted by misuse.

Still, even these scruples would have faded under the pressure of severer needs, had not children come to weaken Nea's strength and keep her drudging at home.

Nea had never seen her father or heard anything from him all this time. Maurice, it was true, had humbled himself again and again, but his letters had all been returned unopened.

But when her boy was born, Nea's heart, softened by the joys of maternity, yearned passionately for a reconciliation, and by her husband's advice, she stifled all feelings of resentment, and wrote as she had never written before, as she never could write again, but all in vain; the letter was returned, and in her weakened state Nea would have fretted herself to death over that unopened letter if it had not been for her husband's tenderness and her baby's innocent face.

How the young mother doated on her child! To her he was a miracle, a revelation. Nature had opened a fount of consolation in her troubles. She would lie patiently for hours on her couch, watching her baby in his sleep. Maurice, coming in jaded and weary from his work, would pause on the threshold to admire the picture. He thought his wife never looked so beautiful as when she had their boy in her arms.

And so the years passed on. Maurice worked, and struggled, and pinched, till his face grew old and careworn, and the hard racking cough began to make itself heard, and Nea's fine colour faded, for the children were coming fast now, and the days were growing darker and darker.

By and by there was a baby girl, with her father's eyes, and beautiful as a little angel; then twin boys whom Nea kissed and fondled for a few weeks, and then laid in their little coffins; then another boy who only lived two years; and lastly, after a long lapse of time, another girl.

But when this one was born the end was fast approaching. Mr. Huntingdon had been abroad for a year or two, and had just returned to Belgrave House,—so Mr. Dobson informed Nea when he dropped in one evening on one of his brief visits,—

and he had brought with him a young widowed niece and her boy.

Nea remembered her cousin Erle Huntingdon and the dark-eyed girl whom he had married and taken with him to Naples; but she had never heard of his death.

Doubtless her father meant to put Beatrice in her place, and make the younger Erle his heir; and Nea sighed bitterly as she looked at her boy playing about the room. Mr. Dobson interpreted the sigh aright.

"Try again, Mrs. Trafford," he said, holding out his hand as he rose; "humble yourself in the dust, for the sake of your children." And Nea took his advice, but she never had any answer to her letter, and soon after that their kind old friend, Mr. Dobson, died, and then everything went wrong.

Maurice's employer gave up business, and his successor, a hard grasping man, found fault with Maurice's failing health, and dismissed him as an incompetent clerk; and this time Maurice found himself without friends.

For a little time longer he struggled on, though broken in heart and health.

They left their comfortable lodgings and took cheaper ones, and sold every article of furniture that was not absolutely necessary; and the day before her baby was born, Nea, weeping bitterly, took her last relic, her mother's portrait, from the locket set with pearls from her neck, and asked Maurice to sell the little ornament.

All through that long illness, though Heaven only knows how, Maurice struggled on.

Ill himself, he nursed his sick wife with patient care and tenderness.

Nea and her little ones had always plenty of nourishing food, though he himself often went without the comforts he needed; he kept the children quiet, he did all and more than all a woman would have done, before, worn out at last in body and mind, he laid himself down, never to rise again.

And Nea, going to him with her sickly baby in her arms, saw a look on his face that terrified her, and knelt down by his side, while he told her between his paroxysms of coughing what little there was to tell.

She knew it all now; she knew the poor, brave heart had been slowly breaking for years, and had given way at last; she knew what he had suffered to see the woman he loved dragged down to the level of his poverty, and made to endure such bitterness of humiliation; she knew, when it was too late, that the man was crushed under the consequences of his weakness, that his remorse was killing him; and that he would seal his repentance with his life. And then came from his pale lips a whispered entreaty that Nea shuddered to hear.

"Dearest," he had said, when she had implored him to say what she could do to comfort him, "there is one thing; go to your father. Yes, my darling," as she shivered at his words, "go to him yourself; let him see your dear face that has grown so thin and pale; perhaps he will see for himself, and have pity. Tell him I am dying, and that I cannot die in peace until he has promised to forgive you, and take care of you and the children. You will do this for me, Nea, will you not? you know how I have suffered, and will not refuse me."

Had she ever refused him anything? Nea kissed the drawn pallid face without a word, tied on her shabby bonnet, and took her baby in her arms,—it was a puny, sickly creature, and wailed incessantly, and she could not leave it,—then with the tears blinding her poor eyes, she walked rapidly through the dark streets, hardly feeling the cutting wind, and quite unconscious of the driving sleet that pelted her face with icy particles.

For her heart felt like a stone; Maurice was dying; but no! he should not die: with her own hands she would hold back her beloved from the entrance to the dark valley; she would minister to his fainting soul the cordial of a tardy forgiveness, though she should be forced to grovel for it at her father's feet.

And then all at once she suddenly stopped, and found she was clinging, panting for breath, to some area railings, that the baby was crying miserably on her bosom, and that she was looking through the open door into her father's hall.

There was a carriage standing there, and a footman was shivering as he walked up and down the pavement. No one took notice of the beggar-woman as they thought her, and Nea, moved by a strange impulse and desire for warmth and comfort, crept a few steps nearer and looked in.

There was a boy in a velvet tunic sliding up and down the gilded balustrades; and a tall woman with dark hair, and a diamond cross on her white neck, swept through the hall in her velvet dress and rebuked him. The boy laughed merrily and went a few steps higher.

"Beatrice and the young Erle Huntingdon," said Nea to herself. And then a tall thin shadow fell across the doorway, and, uttering a half-stifled cry, Nea saw her father, saw his changed face, his gray hair and bowed figure, before she threw herself in his way.

And so, under the gas-light, with servants watching them curiously, Mr. Huntingdon and his daughter met again. One who stood near him says an awful pallor, like the pallor of death, came over his face for an instant when he saw her standing before him with her baby in her arms, but in the next he would have moved on had she not caught him by the arm.

"Father," she sobbed; "father, come with me. Maurice is dying. My husband is dying; but he says he cannot die until he has your forgiveness. Come home with me; come home with your own Nea, father;" but he shook off her grasp, and began to descend the steps.

"Here, Stephen;" he said, taking some gold from his pocket; "give this to the woman and send her away. Come, Beatrice, I am ready."

Merciful Heaven! had this man a human heart, that he

should disown his own flesh and blood? Would it have been wonderful if she had spoken bitter scathing words to the unnatural parent who was driving her from his door? But Nea never spoke, she only turned away with a shudder from the sight of the proffered gold, and then drawing her thin cloak still closer round her child, turned wearily away.

True, she had sinned; but her punishment was a hundred times greater than her sin, she said to herself, and that was all. What a strange stunned quietness was over her; the pain and the fever seemed all burnt out. She did not suffer now. If something that felt like an iron claw would leave off gripping her heart, she could almost have felt comfortable. Maurice must die, she knew that, but something else had died before him. She wondered if it were this same heart of hers; and then she noticed her baby's hood was crooked, and stopped at the next lamp-post to put it straight, and felt a vague sort of pity for it, when she saw its face was pinched and blue with cold, and pressed it closer to her, though she rather hoped to find it dead when she reached home.

"One less to suffer and to starve," thought Nea.

Maurice's wistful eyes greeted her when she opened the door, but she only shook her head and said nothing; what had she to say? She gave her half-frozen infant into a neighbour's care, and then sat down and drew Maurice's face to her bosom, still speechless in that awful apathy.

And there she sat hour after hour, till he died peacefully in her arms, and his last words were, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins."

* * * * *

When she had ceased to wish for them, friends came around her in her trouble and ministered to her wants.

Kind faces followed Maurice to his last resting-place, and saved him from a pauper's grave.

The widow and her children were clothed in decent mourning, and placed in comfortable lodgings.

Nea never roused from her silent apathy, never looked at them or thanked them.

Their kindness had come too late for her, she said to herself, and it was not until long afterwards that she knew that she owed all this consideration to the family of their kind old friend Mr. Dobson, secretly aided by the purse of her cousin Beatrice Huntingdon, who dare not come in person to see her. But by and by they spoke very firmly and kindly to her. They pointed to her children,—they had placed her boy at an excellent school,—and told her that for their sakes she must live and work. If she brooded longer in that sullen despair she would die or go mad; and they brought her baby to her, and watched its feeble arms trying to clasp her neck; saw the widow's passionate tears rain on its innocent face,—the tears that saved the poor hot brain,—and knew she was saved; and by and by, when they thought she had regained her strength, they asked her gently what she could do. Alas! she had suffered her fine talents to rust. They had nothing but impoverished material to use; but at last they found her a situation with two maiden ladies just setting up a school in the neighbourhood, and here she gave daily lessons.

And so, as the years went on, things became a little brighter.

Nea found her work interesting, her little daughter Fern accompanied her to the school, and she taught her with her other pupils.

Presently the day's labour became light to her, and she could look forward to the evening when her son, fetching her on his way from school, would escort her home—a humble home it was true; but when she looked at her boy's handsome face, and Fern's innocent beauty, and felt her little one's caresses, as she climbed up into her lap, the widow owned that her lot had its compensations.

But the crowning trial was yet to come; the last drop of concentrated bitterness.

Not long after Maurice's death, Mr. Huntingdon made his first overture of reconciliation through his lawyer.

His niece, Beatrice, had died suddenly, and her boy was fretting sadly for his mother.

Some one had pointed out to Mr. Huntingdon one day a dark-eyed handsome boy in deep mourning, looking at the riders in Rotten Row, and had told him that it was his grandson, Percy Trafford.

Mr. Huntingdon had said nothing at the time, but the boy's face and noble bearing haunted him, he was so like his mother, when as a child she had played about the rooms at Belgrave House. Perhaps, stifle it as he might, the sobbing voice of his daughter rang in his ears, "Come home with your own Nea, father;" and in spite of his pride his conscience was beginning to torment him.

Nea smiled scornfully when she listened to the lawyer's overtures. Mr. Huntingdon was willing to condone the past with regard to her son Percy. He would take the boy, educate him, and provide for him most liberally, though she must understand that his nephew, Erle, would be his heir, still on every other point the boys should have equal advantages.

"And Belgrave House, the home where my boy is to live, will be closed to his mother," asked Nea, still with that delicate scorn on her face.

The lawyer looked uncomfortable.

"I have no instructions on that point, Mrs. Trafford; I was simply to guarantee that he should be allowed to see you from time to time, as you and he might wish it."

"I cannot entertain the proposal for a moment," she returned, decidedly; but at his strong remonstrance she at last consented that when her boy was a little older, the matter should be laid before him; but no doubt as to his choice crossed her mind. Percy had always been an affectionate child; nothing would induce him to give up his mother.

But she became less confident as the days went on; Percy

grew a little selfish and headstrong, he wanted a man's will to dominate him; his narrow, confined life and the restraints that their poverty enforced on them made him discontented. One day he encountered the lawyer who had spoken to his mother,—he was going to her again, with a letter that Mr. Huntingdon had written to his daughter,—and as he looked at Percy, who was standing idly on the doorstep, he put his hand on his shoulder, and bade him show him the way.

Nea turned very pale as she read the letter. It was very curt and business-like; it repeated the offer he had before made with regard to her son Percy, only adding that for the boy's future prospects it would be well not to refuse his terms. This was the letter that, after a moment's hesitation, Nea placed in her boy's hands.

"Well, mother," he exclaimed, and his eyes sparkled with eagerness and excitement, "I call that splendid; I shall be a rich man one of these days, and then you will see what I shall do for you, and Fern, and Fluff."

"Do you mean that you wish to leave us, Percy, and to live in your grandfather's house?" she returned, trying to speak calmly. "You know what I have told you,—you were old enough to understand what your father suffered, and,—and" with a curious faintness creeping over her "you see for yourself there is no mention of me in that letter. Belgrave House is closed to your mother."

"Yes, I know, and it is an awful shame, but never mind, mother, I shall come and see you very often;" and then when the lawyer had left them to talk it over, he dilated with boyish eagerness on the advantage to them all if he accepted his grandfather's offer. His mother would be saved the expense of his education, she would not have to work so hard; he would be rich himself, and would be able to help them. But at this point she stopped him.

"Understand once for all, Percy," she said with a sternness that he had never seen in her "that the advantage will be

solely for yourself; neither I nor your sisters will ever accept help that comes from Belgrave House; your riches will be nothing to me, my son. Think again before you give up your mother."

He would never give her up, he said, with a rough boyish caress; he should see her often—often, and it was wicked, wrong to talk about refusing his help; he would talk to his grandfather and make him ashamed of himself—indeed there was no end to the glowing plans he made. Nea's heart sickened as she heard him, she knew his boyish selfishness and restlessness were leading him astray, and some of the bitterest tears she ever shed were shed that night.

But from that day she ceased to plead with him, and before many weeks were over Percy had left his mother's humble home, and, after a short stay at Belgrave House, was on his way to Eton with his cousin Erle Huntingdon.

Percy never owned in his secret heart that he had done a mean thing in giving up his mother for the splendours of Belgrave House, that the thought that her son was living in the home that was closed to her was adding gall and bitterness to the widow's life; he thought he was proving himself a dutiful son when he came to see her so often, though the visits were scarcely all he wished them to be.

True, his mother never reproached him, and always welcomed him kindly, but her lips were closed on all that related to his home life. She could speak of his school-fellows and studies, but of his grandfather, and of his new pony and fine gun she would not speak, or even care to hear about them. When he took her his boyish gifts they were quietly but firmly returned to him. Even poor little Florence, or Fluff as they called her, was obliged to give back the blue-eyed doll that he had bought for her. Fluff had fretted so about the loss of the doll that her mother had bought her another.

Percy carried away his gifts, and did not come for a long time. His mother's white wistful face seemed to put him in

the wrong. "Any other fellow would have done the same under the circumstances," thought Percy, sullenly; "I think my mother is too hard on me;" but even his conscience misgave him, when he would see her turn away sometimes with the tears in her eyes, after one of his boasting speeches. He was too young to be hardened. He knew, yes, surely he must have known? that he was grieving the tenderest heart in the world, and one day he would own that not all his grandfather's wealth could compensate him for being a traitor to his mother.

CHAPTER XI

THE WEE WIFIE

"And that same God who made your face so fair,
And gave your woman's heart its tenderness,
So shield the blessing He implanted there,
That it may never turn to your distress,
And never cost you trouble or despair,
Nor granted leave the granted comfortless,
But like a river blest where'er it flows,
Be still receiving while it still bestows."

JEAN INGELOW.

"So far, that my doom is, I love thee still,
Let no man dream but that I love thee still."

TENNYSON'S *Guinevere.*

"SHALL we soon be home, Hugh?"

"Very soon, Wee Wifie."

"Then please put down that great crackling paper behind which you have been asleep the last two hours, and talk to me a little. I want to know the names of the villages through which we are passing, the big houses, and the people who live in them, that I may not enter my dear new home a perfect stranger to its surroundings;" and Lady Redmond shook out her furs, and settled herself anew with fresh dignity.

Sir Hugh yawned for the twentieth time behind his paper, rubbed his eyes, stretched himself, and then let down the window and looked absently down the long country road winding through stubble land; and then at the eddying heaps of dry crisp leaves now blown by a strong November wind under the horses' feet, and now whirling in crazy circles like

witches on Walpurgis's night, until after a shivering remonstrance from his little wife he put up the window with a jerk, and threw himself back with a discontented air on the cushions.

"There is nothing to be seen for a mile or two, Fay, and it is growing dusk now; it will soon be too dark to distinguish a single object;" and so saying, he relapsed into silence, and took up the obnoxious paper again, though the words were scarcely legible in the twilight; while the young bride tried to restrain her weariness, and sat patiently in her corner. Poor Hugh, he was already secretly repenting of the hasty step he had taken; two months of Alpine scenery of quaint old German cities, of rambling through galleries of art treasures with his child-bride, and Hugh had already wearied of his new bonds. All at once he had awakened from his brief delusion with an agony of remembrance, with a terrible heart-longing and home-sickness, with a sense of satiety and vacuum. Fay's gentleness and beauty palled on him; her artless questioning fatigued him. In his secret soul he cried out that she was a mere child and no mate for him, and that he wanted Margaret.

If he had only told his young wife, if he had confided to her pure soul the secret that burthened his, child as she was, she would have understood and pitied and forgiven him; the very suffering would have given her added womanliness and gained his respect, and through that bitter knowledge, honestly told and generously received, a new and better Fay would have risen to win her husband's love.

But he did not tell her—such a thought never entered his mind. So day by day her youth and innocent gaiety only alienated him more, until he grew to look upon her as a mere child, who must be petted and humoured, but who could never be his friend.

Yes, he was bringing home his bride to Redmond Hall, and that bride was not Margaret. In place of Margaret's grand

face, framed in its dead-brown hair and deep, pathetic eyes, was a childish face, with a small rose-bud mouth that was just now quivering and plaintive.

"Dear Hugh, I am so very tired, and you will not talk to me," in a sad babyish voice.

"Will talking rest you, Birdie," asked Hugh, dropping his paper and taking the listless little hand kindly.

Fay drooped her head, for she was ashamed of the bright drops that stole through her lashes from very weariness. Hugh would think her babyish and fretful. She must not forget she was Lady Redmond; so she answered without looking up,

"We have been travelling since daybreak this morning you know, Hugh, and it is all so fresh and strange to me, and I want to hear your voice to make it seem real somehow; perhaps I feel stupid because I am tired, but I had an odd fancy just now that it was all a dream, and that I should wake up in my little room at the cottage and find myself again Fay Mordaunt."

"Is not the new name prettier, dear?" observed her husband, gently.

Fay coloured and hesitated, and finally hid her face in shy fashion on Hugh's shoulder, while she glanced at the little gold ring that shone so brightly in the dusk.

"Fay Redmond," she whispered. "Oh yes, it is far prettier," and a tender smile came to her face, an expression of wonderful beauty. "Did ever name sound half so sweet as that?"

"What is my Wee Wifie thinking about?" asked Hugh at last, rousing himself with difficulty from another musing fit.

Fay raised her head with a little dignity.

"I wish you would not call me that, Hugh."

"Not call you that?" in genuine astonishment. "Why, are you not my Wee Wifie? I think it is the best possible name I could find for you; is it not pretty enough for your ladyship?"

"Yes, but it is so childish, and will make people smile,

and Aunt Griselda would be shocked, and——" but here she broke off, flushed and looking much distressed.

"Nay, give me all your reasons," said Hugh, kindly. "I cannot know all that is in my little wife's heart yet." But Hugh, as he said this, sighed involuntarily, as he thought how little he cared to trace the workings of that innocent young mind.

The gentleness of his tone gave Fay courage.

"I don't know, of course,—at least I forget,—but I am really sure that—that—*The Polite Match-Maker* would not consider it right."

"What?" exclaimed Hugh, opening his eyes wide and regarding Fay with amazement.

"*The Polite Match-Maker*, dear," faltered Fay, "the book that Aunt Griselda gave me to study when I was engaged, because she said that it contained all the necessary and fundamental rules for well-bred young couples. To be sure she smiled, and said it was a little old-fashioned; but I was so anxious to learn the rules perfectly that I read it over three or four times."

"And *The Polite Match-Maker* would not approve of Wee Wifie, you think?" and Sir Hugh tried to repress a smile.

"Oh, I am sure of it," she returned, seriously; "the forms of address were so different."

"Give me an example, then, or I can hardly profit by the rule."

Fay had no need to consider, but she hesitated for all that. She was never sure how Hugh would take things when he had that look on his face. She did not want him to laugh at her.

"Of course it is old-fashioned, as Aunt Griselda says; but I know the *Match-Maker* considered 'Honoured Wife,' or 'Dearest Madam,' the correct form of address." And as Hugh burst out laughing, she continued, in a slightly injured tone,—"Of course I know that people do not use those terms now, but all the same, I am sure Aunt Griselda would not think Wee Wifie sufficiently respectful,"—and here Fay looked ready to

cry,—"and though the book is old-fashioned she said many of the rules were excellent."

"But, Fay," remonstrated her husband, "does it not strike you that the rules must be obsolete, savouring of the days of Sir Charles Grandison and Clarissa Harlowe? Pshaw!" with a frown, "I forgot I was gauging a child's intellect. Well," turning to her, "what is your busy little mind hatching now?"

"Dear Hugh," stammered Fay timidly, "I know I am very ignorant, and I ought to know better, and I will look in the dictionary as soon as I—— but I do not know the meaning of the word obsolete."

"Pshaw!" again muttered Sir Hugh; then aloud, "The term, honoured madam, signifies disused, out of date, ancient, antiquated, antique, neglected, and so on."

"Ah, Hugh, now I know you are laughing at me; but," rather anxiously, "the *Match-Maker* cannot be all wrong, can it? It is only what you call obsolete."

"My dear child," answered Hugh, gravely, "you can trust your husband's judgment, I hope, before even this wonderful book—in this matter I am sure you can; and in my opinion the prettiest name I could have selected is this 'Wee Wifie.' It pleases me," continued Hugh, his fine features working with secret pain. "It is no name of the past, it touches on no hoped-for future, and it reminds me of my little wife's claim to forbearance and sympathy from her extreme youth and ignorance of the world. To others you may be Lady Redmond, but to me you must ever be my Wee Wifie."

Fay clasped his neck with a little sob.

"Yes, you shall call me that. I know I am only a silly ignorant little thing, and you are so grand and wise; but you love your foolish little wife, do you not, Hugh?"

"Yes, of course;" but as Hugh hushed the rosy lips with that silencing kiss, his conscience felt an uneasy twinge. Did he really love her? Was such fondness worth the acceptance

of any woman, when, with all his efforts, he could scarcely conceal his weariness of her society, and already the thought of the life-long tie that bound them together was becoming intolerable to him? But he shut his ears to the accusing voice that was ever whispering to him that his fatal error would bring its punishment. Well, he was responsible, humanly speaking, for the happiness of this young life; as far as he knew how, he would do his duty.

"Well, sweetheart," he observed, glancing enviously at Fay's bright face, now quite forgetful of fatigue—how could she be tired while Hugh talked to her!—"what other amusing rules does this marvellous book contain?"

"I do think it is a marvellous book, though it is somewhat obsolete;" and here Fay stammered over the formidable word. "I know it said in one place that married people ought to have no secrets from each other, and that was why I told you about Frank Lumsden;" and here Fay blushed very prettily.

"Frank Lumsden," observed Hugh, in some perplexity; "I don't think I remember, Fay."

"Not remember what I told you that Sunday evening in the lane—the evening after we were engaged! How Mr. Lumsden wanted to tell me how he admired me, but I cried and would not let him; and he went away so unhappy, poor fellow. As though I could ever have cared for him," continued Fay, with innocent scorn, as she looked up into Hugh's handsome face. He was regarding her attentively just then.

Yes, she was pretty, he knew that—lovely, no doubt, to her boy lovers. But to him, with the memory of Margaret's grand ideal beauty ever before him, Fay's pink and pearly bloom, though it was as purely tinted as the inner calyx of a rose, faded into mere colour prettiness. And as yet the spell of those wonderful eyes, of which Frank Lumsden dreamt, had exercised no potent fascination over her husband's heart.

"Hugh," whispered Fay, softly, "you have not kept any secrets from me, have you? I know I am very young to share

all your thoughts, but you will tell your little wife everything, will you not?"

No secrets from her! Heaven help her, poor child. Would she know—would she ever know? And with a great throb of pain his heart answered "No."

"Why are you so silent, Hugh; you have no secrets surely?"

"Hush, dear, we cannot talk any more now; we have passed the church and the Vicarage already—we are nearly home;" and as he spoke they came in sight of the lodge, where Catharine was waiting with her baby in her arms.

Fay smiled and nodded, and then they turned in at the gate, and the darkness seemed to swallow them up.

The avenue leading to Redmond Hall was the glory of the whole neighbourhood.

Wayfarers, toiling along the hot and dusty road that leads from Singleton to Sandycliffe, always paused to look through the great gate at the green paradise beyond.

It was like a glade in some forest, so deep was its shadowy gloom, so unbroken its repose; while the arrowy sun-shaft flickered patterns on the mossy footpaths, or drew a golden girdle round some time-worn trunk.

Here stood the grand old oaks, under whose branches many a Redmond played as a child in the days before the Restoration,—long before the time when Marmaduke, fifth baronet of that name, joined the forces of Rupert, and fell fighting by the side of his dead sons.

Here too were the aged beeches; some with contorted holes, and marvellously-twisted limbs, like Titans struggling in their death-throes, and others with the sap of youth still flowing through their woody veins, as they stood clothed in the beauty of their prime. Fay had often played in this wonderful avenue. She remembered, when she was a child, rambling with her nurse in the Redmond woods, with their copses of nut-trees and wild-rose thickets; and their tiny sylvan lawns, starred over with woodland flowers, such as Spenser would

have peopled "with bearded Fauns and Satyrs, who with their horned feet do wear the ground, and all the woody nymphs—the fair Hamadryades;" but though she peered eagerly out in the darkness, she could see nothing but the carriage lamps flashing on some bare trunk or gaunt skeleton branches.

"Dear Hugh," she whispered, timidly, "how gloomy and strange it looks—just like an enchanted forest."

"They have not thought fit to cut down the trees to give light to your ladyship," observed her husband, laughing at her awe-struck tone. "Give me your hand, you foolish child; when we have passed the next turning you will see the old Hall. There will be light enough there;" and scarcely had the words passed his lips before the Hall burst upon them—a long low range of building, with its many windows brilliantly illuminated and ruddy with firelight, while through the open door the forms of the assembled servants moved hither and thither in a warm background of light.

"What a lovely old place," cried Fay, breathless with excitement. "I had almost forgotten how beautiful it was, but I shall see it better by daylight to-morrow."

"Yes," he returned, with a sigh, "I shall have plenty to show you, Fay, but now let me help you off with those furs, and lift you out."

Fay shook herself free of the heavy wraps, and then sprang lightly to the ground; and with her head erect like a little queen, stepped over the threshold of her new home with her hand still in her husband's.

The circle of men and women gathered in the great hall, with the housekeeper and grey-haired butler at their head, thrilled with a vague surprise and wonder at the sight of the childish figure beside their master.

"Good evening to you all," said Hugh, trying to speak cheerfully, though there was a huskiness in his pleasant voice that was foreign to it. "You see I have brought home your new mistress at last, Ellerton. Mrs. Heron," shaking

hands with her, "you must give Lady Redmond a hearty welcome."

"Yes, indeed, Sir Hugh," and the stately housekeeper folded her plump hands and looked complacently at the pretty face before her. "A thousand welcomes both to you and her ladyship, Sir Hugh, and a long life and a happy one to you both."

But the housekeeper, as she ended her little speech with an elaborate curtsey, was marvelling in her kindly heart what on earth had possessed her master to bring this lovely child to be the mistress of Redmond Hall.

"Thank you, very much," returned Fay, timidly, and her sweet face flushed as she spoke. "I trust we shall soon become good friends. I know how you all love my dear husband, and I hope in time that you will be able to love me too for his sake."

"There can be no doubt of that, I should think, Mrs. Heron," returned Sir Hugh, moved in spite of himself; and at his tone the shy fingers closed more tightly round his. Those who were standing by never forgot Fay's look, when the girl-wife raised her beautiful eyes to her husband's face.

"And now," continued Sir Hugh, "you are very tired, Fay, but our good Mrs. Heron will show you your rooms, that you may rest and refresh yourself after your long journey. This is your maid, I believe," turning to a fresh, bright-looking girl, behind him; then, as Fay obediently left him, "What time will dinner be served, Ellerton?"

"At a quarter to eight, Sir Hugh."

"Very well; I hope there are lights and a fire in the study."

"Yes, Sir Hugh, and in the damask drawing-room as well." But his master did not seem to hear him, as he walked slowly across the hall on his way to his dressing-room.

CHAPTER XII

IN THE BLUE NESTIE

. . . . This perhaps was love—
To have its hands too full of gifts to give
For putting out a hand to take a gift;
To have so much, the perfect mood of love
Includes, in strict conclusion, being loved;
As Eden dew went up and fell again,
Enough for watering Eden, obviously
She had not thought about his love at all.
The cataracts of her soul had poured themselves,
And risen self-crown'd in rainbow; would she ask
Who crown'd her?—it sufficed that she was crown'd.

E. B. BROWNING.

REDMOND HALL was a curious old house; it had been built originally in Gothic style, but an aspiring Redmond, who was ignorant of the laws of architecture and not possessed with the spirit of uniformity, had thrown out windows and added wings that savoured strongly of the Tudor style, while here and there a buttress or arch was decidedly Norman in its tendency.

To a connoisseur this medley of architecture was a great eye-sore, but to the world in general the very irregularity of the grey old pile added to its picturesque entirety, and somehow the effect was very pleasing.

The various owners of the Hall, holding all modern innovations in abhorrence, had preserved its antiquity as far as possible by restoring the old carvings and frescoes that were its chief ornaments. The entrance-hall was of noble dimensions, with

a painted ceiling, and a great fireplace surrounded by oaken-carvings of fruit and flowers, the work of Gibbon, with the Redmond motto, "Fideles ad urnam," in the centre.

The walls were adorned with stag's antlers, and other trophies of the chase, while implements of warfare, from the bow and arrow to the modern revolver, were arranged in geometrical circles round the battered suits of armour.

The dwelling-rooms of the house, with the exception of the drawing-room and billiard-room, were long and low, with the same painted ceilings and heavy oak-carvings; and some of the windows especially in the library and morning-room, were furnished with such deep embrasures, as to form small with-drawing rooms in themselves, and leave the farther end of the apartment in twilight obscurity even on the brightest summer's day.

Many people were of opinion that the old Hall needed complete renovation, but Sir Wilfred had cared little for such things. In his father's time a few of the rooms had been modernised and refurnished, the damask drawing-room for example, a handsome billiard-room added, and two or three bedrooms fitted up according to nineteenth century taste.

But Sir Wilfred had preferred the old rooms in the quaint embrasures, where many a fair Redmond dame had worked with her daughters at the tapestry that hung in the green bedroom, which represented the death of Saul and the history of Gideon.

In these rooms was furniture belonging to many a different age. Carpets and chair-cushions worked in tent stitch and cross stitch and old-fashioned harpsichord; gaudy white and gold furniture of the Louis Quatorze time, mixed with the spindle-legged tables of the Queen Anne epoch.

At the back of the Hall lay a broad stone terrace reaching from one end of the house to the other.

On one side were the stables and kennels, and on the other a walled sunny garden, with fruit trees and a clipped yew-hedge

and a sun-dial, on which a stately race of peacocks loved to plume themselves.

Beyond, divided by the yew-hedge, was the herb-garden, where in the olden time many a notable house-mother, with her chintz skirts hustled through her pocket-holes, gathered simples for her medicines, and sweet-smelling lavender and rosemary for her presses of home-spun linen.

These gardens were walled and entered by a curiously-wrought iron door, said to be Flemish work; and below the terrace lay a smooth, gently-sloping lawn, that stretched to the edge of a large sheet of water, called by courtesy the lake,—the whole shut in by the background of the Redmond wood.

Here through the sunny afternoon slept purple shadows, falling aslant the yellow water-lilies, and here underneath the willows and silvery birches, in what was called "The Lover's Walk," had Hugh dreamed many a day-dream, whose beginning and whose end was Margaret.

Poor Hugh! he little thought as he paced that walk that the day should come when his wife should walk there beside him, and look at him with eyes that were not Margaret's.

When Fay, escorted by Mrs. Heron and followed by Janet, had ascended the broad oaken staircase, and passed through the long gallery, the housekeeper paused in a recess with four red-baized doors.

"Sir Hugh's dressing-room, my lady," she explained, blandly, "and the next door belongs to Sir Hugh's bath-room, and this," pointing solemnly to the central door, "is the Oriel room."

"What," faltered Lady Redmond, rather fearing from Mrs. Heron's manner that this room might be the subject of some ghost story.

"The Oriel room," repeated the housekeeper still more impressively, "where the Redmond ladies have always slept. In this room both Sir Wilfred and Sir Hugh were born, and Sir Marmaduke and his sons Percy and Herewald were laid in state after the battle."

It was well that Fay did not understand the latter end of the housekeeper's speech, but she shuddered notwithstanding with vague discomfort when the door was opened, and all the glories of the Oriel room were displayed before her. It was so large and grand that a queen might have slept in it and have been content, but to Fay's eyes it was only a great gloomy room, so full of hidden corners and recesses, that the blazing firelight and the wax candles only seemed to give a faint circle of light, beyond which lurked weird shadows, hiding in the deep embrasures of the windows, or beaming against the painted ceiling.

The cabinets and wardrobe, and grotesque tables and chairs, all of black oak, and, above all, the great oak bedstead with its curiously twisted pillars and heavy silk damask curtains,—each projected separate shadows and filled Fay's mind with dismay, while from the panelled walls the childish figure was reflected in dim old mirrors.

"Oh dear," sighed the little bride, "I shall never dare to be by myself in this room. Janet, you must never leave me; look how those shadows move."

"It is not quite canny, my lady," replied Janet, glancing behind her at her mistress's word, "but I think I can mend matters a little;" and so saying, she touched the logs so smartly that they spluttered and emitted showers of sparks, till the whole room gleamed warm and ruddy with reflected brightness.

"That is better, Janet," cried Fay, delightedly; "but where are you going, Mrs. Heron?" for the housekeeper was making mysterious signs that her lady should follow her to a curtained recess; "indeed," she continued, wearily, "I am very tired, and would rather see nothing more."

"Don't be too sure of that, my lady," returned Mrs. Heron, smiling, and her tone made Fay follow her at once.

But the next moment she uttered a little scream of delight, for there, hidden away behind the ruby curtains, was a tiny room—"a wee blue-lined nestie," fitted up as a boudoir or

morning-room. The bow window promised plenty of light, a cheerful modern paper covered the wall, with one or two choice landscapes; the snowy rug; the soft luxurious couch and low easy-chairs, covered with delicate blue cretonne; the writing-tables, and bookcase, were all so suggestive of use and comfort. Two lovebirds nestled like green blossoms in their gilded cage, and a white Persian kitten was purring before the fire.

"Oh, the dear room!" exclaimed Fay, in a perfect ecstasy, and then oblivious of her dignity, her fatigue, and the presence of the stately housekeeper, Lady Redmond sat down on the soft white rug, and lifted the kitten on her lap.

"I had a Persian kitten once," she observed, innocently; "but I took her down to the cowslip meadow and lost her. We called her the White Witch, she was so pretty and so full of mischief. I made myself quite ill crying over her loss, we were so afraid she was killed," and here Fay buried her face in the little creature's fur, as she rocked herself to and fro in the firelight.

Mrs. Heron and Janet exchanged looks. Janet was smiling, but the housekeeper's face wore a puzzled expression; her new mistress bewildered her.

The worthy soul could make nothing of these sudden changes: first a tiny woman rustling in silks, and holding her head like a little queen, with a plaintive voice speaking sweet words of welcome; then a pale, tired lady peering into corners and averse to shadows; and now, nothing but a pretty child rocking herself to and fro with a kitten in her arms. No wonder Mrs. Heron shook her head rather gravely as she left the room.

"What on earth will my master do with a child like that?" she thought; "she will not be more of a companion to him than that kitten—but there, he knows his own business best, and she is a pretty creature." But all the same, Mrs. Heron still shook her head at intervals, for all the household knew that Margaret Ferrers, the sister of the blind vicar of Sandy-

cliffe, was to have come to the Hall as its mistress; and the housekeeper's faithful eyes had already noticed the cloud on her master's brow.

"'Marry in haste and repent at leisure,' that is what many a man has done to his cost," she soliloquised, as she bustled about her comfortable room. "Well, she is a bonnie child, and he's bound to make her happy; she will be like a bit of sunshine in the old Hall if he does not damp her cheerfulness with his gloomy moods."

A little while afterwards, Ellerton met his little mistress wandering about the Hall, and ushered her into the damask drawing-room. Fay was looking for her husband.

She had escaped from Janet, and had been seeking him some time, opening doors and stumbling into endless passages, but always making her way back somehow to the focus of light —the big hall; and feeling drearily as though she were some forlorn princess shut up in an enchanted castle, who could not find her prince.

She wanted to feel his arms round her, and sob out all her strangeness; and now an ogre in the shape of the grey-haired butler had shut her up in a great, brilliantly-lighted room, where the tiny, white woman saw herself reflected in the long mirrors.

Fay, standing dejected and pale in the centre of the room, felt like Beauty in the Beast's palace, and was dreaming out the story in her odd childish way, when the door was flung suddenly open, and the prince, in the person of Sir Hugh, made his appearance.

She ran towards him with a little cry; but something in his look checked her, and she stood hesitating and colouring as he came up to her and offered his arm.

"Ellerton has announced dinner," he said, quietly; "draw your scarf round you, for the Hall is cold. You look very nice, dear," he continued, kindly, looking at the dainty little bit of loveliness beside him with critically approving eyes; "you

should always wear white in the evening, Fay;" and then, as they entered the dining-room, he placed her at the head of the table.

Poor child, it seemed all very solemn and stately, with Ellerton and two other footmen to wait on them; to be divided from her husband by silver epergnes and choice flowers, to have to peep between the ferns and flowers for a sight of the golden-brown beard. No wonder her little talk died away, and she stammered in her replies, and then blushed and felt discomposed. She thought she was playing her part very awkwardly, and was ashamed of herself for Hugh's sake, never dreaming that the very servants who waited on her were wondering at the radiant young creature. Everything comes to an end in this world, and so did this ordeal; for after what seemed to her endless courses, the door closed on the retiring servants, and she and her husband were left alone together; and when Sir Hugh woke up from a brief musing fit he found Fay at his end of the table watching him.

"Why! what brings you here, Wee Wifie?" he asked, smiling; "have you finished your grapes—am I keeping you waiting?"

"Oh! I am in no hurry," she returned, calmly. "I am going to enjoy my grapes here; it is so dull at the other end of the table;" and she chatted merrily to him, while Hugh drank his coffee, and then coaxed him up into the "blue nestie."

Hugh took all her thanks very graciously. He was pleased that her innocent tastes should be gratified; he never imagined for a moment that she thought he had chosen all the pretty nick-nacks round them.

He had said everything suitable to a lady's boudoir was to be provided, and the people had done it very well. He had given them *carte blanche*, and it was certainly a very pretty little room; and then he watched Fay presiding over her tea-table, and listened placidly to her ecstasy over the lovely old china cups, and the dear little antiquated silver cream-jug, and the

tiny spoons; and for a little while her brightness infected him. But presently, when she came and nestled against him and told him how happy she was, and how dearly she meant to love her new home, the old look of pain came back on his face; and telling her that he knew his Wee Wifie was tired and must go to bed, he kissed her twice, and then putting her hurriedly from him, went downstairs.

And when he got into his library and saw the lamp lighted, and the fire burning brightly, he gave a sigh of relief at finding himself alone, and threw himself down in his easy-chair.

And that night, long after Fay had prayed that she might be worthy of Hugh's love, and make him happy, and had fallen asleep in the old oak bed with a child's utter weariness, did Hugh sit with his aching head buried on his arms, thinking how he should bear it, and what he would do with his life!

And so the home life began, which was far more tolerable to Sir Hugh than his continental wanderings had been; when he rode over his estate and Fay's—the Wyngate lands adjoining, from morning until late afternoon, planning, building, restoring, or went into Pierrepoint on magisterial business, happy if at night he was so weary with exercise that rest was a pleasure and his little wife's manipulations sweet. All the surrounding gentry for miles round came to call at the Hall, and were loud in their praises of the sweet-faced bride; but the Ferrers were not among them—all those winter months Sir Hugh never saw Margaret. No, though the Grange and the Hall were but two miles apart, they never met; though many a time Sir Hugh had to turn his horse into some miry lane, or across a ploughed field, to escape her as she went to and fro among the wayside cottages.

Neither did they meet at the various entertainments—dinner-parties and dances that were given in honour of the bride. That winter Margaret declined all invitations; her brother needed her—and she had never cared much for gaiety—this was her only excuse. But Sir Hugh knew why he never met her—her

high sense of honour kept them apart—neither of them had lived down their pain; in the future it might be possible for her to be his friend, and the friend of his wife; but now it could hardly be; and yet Margaret was longing, craving intensely to see the lovely young creature of whom every one was speaking, and whom already she loved by report.

Strange to say, no one spoke about the Ferrers to Fay; people were too well acquainted with the story of Sir Hugh's engagement to Margaret to venture on a hint. Once Fay asked a lady with whom she was driving, who lived in that quaint old house on the Sandycliffe road? and was told briefly that the blind vicar, Mr. Ferrers, lived there with his sister.

Fay would have put some more questions, but Mrs. Sinclair turned the subject rather quickly; but Fay recurred to it that evening.

"Why have not the Ferrers called on us, Hugh?" she asked, suddenly, when she was keeping him company in the library.

Sir Hugh started, and then jumped up to replenish the fire.

"Who told you about them?" he asked, as he tried to break a refractory coal.

"Mrs. Sinclair. I was driving with her this afternoon, and I asked her who lived in that red brick house with the curious gables, on the Sandycliffe road, and she said it was the blind vicar, Mr. Ferrers, and his sister; don't you like them, Hugh? every one else has called, and it seems rather strange that they should have taken no notice."

"Well, you see, it is a little awkward," returned her husband, still wrestling with the coal, while Fay watched the process with interest; "they used to be friends of mine, but we have had a misunderstanding, and now, of course, there is a coolness."

"And they are nice people."

"Very nice people; he is a very clever man, but we do not agree,—that is all;" and then Hugh disposed of the coal and took up his paper, and Fay did not like to disturb him with

any more questions. It seemed a great pity, she thought, it was such a lovely house; and if Mr. Ferrers were a nice clever man—— and then she wondered what his sister was like; and as she sat at Hugh's feet basking in the firelight she had no idea that Hugh's forehead was clouded and puckered with pain. Fay's innocent questions had raised a storm in his breast. Would she speak of them again? was there any danger that people would gossip to her? one day he might be obliged to tell her himself, but not now, she seemed so happy, so perfectly contented, and she was such a child.

Yes, Hugh's Wee Wifie was very happy.

At first, to be sure, her position was a little difficult and irksome. The number of servants bewildered her; she wished Mrs. Heron would not interlard her conversation with so many "my ladys," and that Hugh would ride with her oftener instead of that tiresome groom.

But by and by she got used to her new dignity, and would drive her grey ponies through the country roads, stopping to speak to any old villager she knew; or she would mount Bonnie Bess at the hour she thought Hugh would be returning from Pierrepoint, and gallop through the lanes to meet him and rein up at his side, startling him from his abstraction with that ringing laugh of hers.

She was seldom idle, and never dull.

When Sir Hugh had shooting parties, she always carried the luncheon to the sportsmen, driving through the wood in her pony-carriage; when her husband began to return his neighbours' hospitality, she surprised him by making a perfect little hostess, and never seemed too shy to chat in her pretty, modest manner to his guests. All Sir Hugh's masculine friends fell in love with her, and the ladies petted and made much of her.

Fay was very grateful to them for their kindness, but she liked best to be alone in the old Hall.

She had a hundred sources of amusement; she would

follow Mrs. Heron from room to room, listening to her stories of many a dead Redmond; or coax her to show the old treasures of tapestry and lace; or she would wander through the gardens and woods with her favourite Nero and Sir Hugh's noble St. Bernard, Pierre.

She made acquaintance with every man, woman, and child about the place, and all the animals besides; when the spring came she knew all the calves and lambs by name, all the broods of chickens and ducklings; she visited the stables and the poultry-yards till every helper and boy about the premises knew her bright face well, and were ready to vow that a sweeter-spoken creature never lived than the young Lady Redmond.

And she would prattle to Hugh all through the long dinner, beguiling him by her quaint bright stories; and when he went into the library—she never could coax him after that first evening into her "blue nestie"—she would follow him and sit herself at his feet with her work or book, perfectly content if he sometimes stroked her hair, or with a sudden feeling of compunction stooped over her and kissed her brow, for he was always very gentle with her, and Fay adored him from the depths of her innocent heart.

CHAPTER [illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible] was [illegible] room, this room of Mrs. W[illegible]', seen [illegible] the November dusk with its bright fire and neat [illegible] kettle singing [illegible] to itself; there [illegible] something comfortable and home-like about it; [illegible] the red curtains were drawn across the two [illegible] that look down into High Street, and the great carts that had been rumbling underneath them since daybreak had given place to the jolting of lighter vehicles which passed and repassed at intervals.

The room was large, though a little low, and was plainly but comfortably furnished; an old-fashioned crimson couch stood in one corner; some stained bookshelves contained a few well bound books; and one or two simple engravings in cheap frames adorned the wall. In spite of the simplicity of the whole there were evidences of refined taste—there were growing ferns in tall baskets; some red leaves and autumn berries arranged in old china vases; a beautiful head of Clyte, though it was only in plaster of Paris, on the mantelpiece. The pretty tea service on the round table was only white china,

hand-painted; and some more red leaves with dark chrysanthemums were tastefully arranged in a low wicker basket in the centre.

One glance would have convinced even a stranger that this room was inhabited by people of cultured taste and small means; and it was so pleasant, so home-like, so warm with ruddy firelight, that grander rooms would have looked comfortless in comparison. There were only two people in it on this November evening—a girl lying back in a rocking-chair, with her eyes fixed thoughtfully on the dancing flames, and a child of ten, though looking two or three years younger, sitting on a stool before the fire, with a black kitten asleep on her lap, and her arms clasped round her knees.

An odd, weird sort of child, with a head running over with little dark curls, and large wondering eyes—not an ordinary child, and certainly not a pretty one, and looking, at the present moment, with her wrinkled eyebrows and huddled-up figure, like a little old witch in a fairy tale.

"I am that tired," observed the child, apparently apostrophising the kettle, "that not all the monkeys in the Zoological Gardens could make me laugh; no, not if they had the old father baboon at their head. I wish I were a jaguar!"

"Why, Fluff?" exclaimed a pleasant voice from the rocking-chair. "Why, Fluff?"

"I wish I were a jaguar," repeated the child, defiantly; "not a bison, because of its hump, nor a camel either. Why, those great spotted cats had their balls to amuse them, and polished ivory bones as well; and the brown bear climbed his pole, and ate buns; no one's mother left it in the dark before the fire, with no one to tell it tales, and only a kettle to talk to a person;" and Fluff curled herself up on her stool with an affronted air.

The elder girl made no answer, but only stooped down and smilingly lifted the child and kitten on her lap,—she was very small and light for her age,—whereupon Fluff left off sighing,

and rubbed her curly head against her sister's shoulder with a contented air.

The sisters were certainly very unlike, Fluff being very small and dark, while Fern was tall and fair; without being exactly gifted with her mother's beauty, she had a charming face, soft grey eyes, and hair of that golden-brown that one sees so often in English girls.

There were few people who did not think Fern Trafford decidedly pretty; her features were not exactly regular, but her colouring was lovely, and there was a joyousness and brightness about her that attracted old and young; every one loved Fern, and spoke well of her, she was so simple, so unselfish, so altogether charming, as they said.

Fern never complained of the narrowness of her life, never fretted because their poverty excluded her from the pleasures girls of her age generally enjoyed. From her childhood she had known no other life. There were times when she remembered that she had gone to bed hungry, times when her mother's face looked pinched and miserable—when her father was dying, and they thought Baby Florence would die too. Somehow Fern never cared to think of those days.

Fern was devoted to her mother, she clave to her with innocent love and loyalty. Percy's defection had been the bitterest trouble of her life. The girl nearly broke her heart when Percy left them. She grew thin and pale and large-eyed, as girls will when they are fretting and growing at the same time. Nea's motherly heart was touched with compassion for her child. She wished, if possible, to suffer alone; if it were in her power she would prevent the faintest shadow touching that bright young life.

So she spoke to her in her calm, sensible way, for Nea was always gentle with her children, and Fern was very dear to her —she had her father's eyes, and Maurice's pure upright nature seemed transmitted to his young daughter.

"Fern," she said, one evening when they were sitting to

gether in the twilight, "you must not add to my burthens; it makes me still more unhappy to see you fretting; I miss my little daughter's brightness that used to be such a comfort to me."

"Am I a comfort to you, mother?" asked Fern, wistfully, and something in those earnest grey eyes thrilled the widow's heart with fresh pangs of memory.

"You are my one bit of sunshine," she answered, fondly, taking the girl's face between her hands and kissing it almost passionately. "Keep bright for your poor mother's sake, Fern."

Fern never forgot this little speech. She understood, then, that her mission was to be her mother's comforter; and with the utmost sweetness and unselfishness she put aside her own longings for her brother, and strove to make up for his loss. So Fern bloomed in her poor home like some lovely flower in a cottage garden, growing up to womanhood in those rooms over Mrs. Watkins'.

Fern had long since finished her education, and now gave morning lessons to the vicar's little daughters. In her leisure hours she made her simple gowns and Fluff's frocks, and taught the child the little she could be persuaded to learn, for Fluff was a spoilt child and very backward for her age; and one or two people, Mrs. Watkins among them, had given it as their opinion that little Florence was not all there, rather odd and uncanny in fact.

Fern was quite contented with her life. She was fond of teaching and very fond of her little pupils. Her pleasures were few and simple; a walk with Crystal or Fluff to look at the shops, perhaps an omnibus journey and an hour or two's ramble in the Park or Kensington Garden, a cosy chat with her mother in the evening, sometimes, on grand occasions, a shilling seat at the Monday or Saturday Popular.

Fern loved pretty things, but she seemed quite satisfied to look at them through plate glass; a new dress, a few flowers, or a new book were events in her life. She would sing over

her work as she sat sewing by the window; the gay young voice made people look up, but they seldom caught a glimpse of the golden-brown head behind the curtain. Fern had her dreams, like other girls; something, she hardly knew what, would happen to her some day. There was always a prince in the fairy stories that she told Fluff, but she never described him. "What is he like?" Fluff would ask with childish impatience, but Fern would only blush and smile, and say she did not know. If, sometimes, a handsome boyish face, not dark like Percy, but with a fair, budding moustache and laughing eyes, seemed to rise out of the mist and look at her with odd wistfulness, Fern never spoke of it; a sort of golden haze pervaded it. Sometimes those eyes were eloquent, and seemed appealing to her; a strange meaning pervaded the silence; in that poor room blossomed all sorts of sweet fancies and wonderful dreams as Fern's needle flew through the stuff.

As Fluff rubbed her rough head confidingly against her shoulder, Fern gave a musical little laugh that was delicious to hear. "You absurd child," she said, in an amused tone, "I really must tell Mr. Erle not to take you again to the Zoological Gardens; you talk of nothing but bears and jaguars. So you want a story, you are positively insatiable, Fluff; how am I to think of one with my wits all wool-gathering and gone a-wandering like Bopeep's sheep? It must be an old one. Which is it to be? 'The Chocolate House,' or 'Princess Dove and the Palace of the Hundred Boys.'"

"Humph," returned Fluff, musingly; "well, I hardly know. The Chocolate House is very nice, with its pathway paved with white and pink sugar plums, and its barley-sugar chairs; and, don't you remember that when Hans was hungry, he broke a little brown bit off the roof; but, after all, I think I like Princess Dove and the Palace of the Hundred Boys best. Let us go on where you left off."

"Where we left off?" repeated Fern in her clear voice. "Yes, I recollect. Well, when Prince Happy-Thought—"

"Merrydew," corrected the child.

"Ah—true—well, when it came to Prince Merrydew's turn to throw up the golden ball, it went right over the moon and came down the other side, so Princess Dove proclaimed him victor, and gave him the sapphire crown; and the hundred boys —and—where was I, Fluff?"

"In the emerald meadow, where the ruby flowers grew," returned Fluff. "Go on, Fern."

"So Princess Dove put on the crown, and it was so heavy that poor Prince Merrydew's head began to ache, and the wicked old fairy Do-nothing, who was looking on, hobbled on her golden crutches to the turquoise pavilion, and—hush! I hear footsteps. Jump off my lap, Fluffy, dear, and let me light the candles." And she had scarcely done so before there was a quick tap at the door, and the next moment two young men entered the room.

Fluff ran to them at once with a pleased exclamation.

"Why, it is Percy and Mr. Erle; oh dear, how glad I am."

"How do you do, Toddlekins," observed her brother, stooping to kiss the child's cheek, and patting her kindly on the head; "how are you, you dark-eyed witch," but as he spoke, his eyes glanced anxiously round the room.

"We never expected to see you to-night, Percy, dear," observed Fern, as she greeted him affectionately, and then gave her hand with a slight blush to the young man who was following him. "Mother will be so sorry to miss you; she was obliged to go out again. One of the girls at Miss Martingale's is ill, and Miss Theresa seems fidgety about her, so mother said she would sit with the invalid for an hour or two."

"I suppose Miss Davenport is out too,"—walking to the fireplace to warm his hands.

"Yes, dear; there is a children's party at the Nortons'; it is little Nora's birthday, and nothing would satisfy the child until Crystal promised to go and play with them. It is only an

early affair, and she will be back soon, so Fluff and I are waiting tea for her."

"You look very snug here, Miss Trafford," observed the other young man, whom Fluff had called Mr. Erle. By tacit consent his other name was never uttered in that house; it would have been too painful to Mrs. Trafford to hear him addressed as Mr. Huntingdon.

The young men were complete contrasts to each other. Percy Trafford was tall and slight, he had his mother's fine profile and regular features, and was a singularly handsome young man; his face would have been almost perfect, except for the weak irresolute mouth, hardly hidden by the dark moustache and a somewhat heavily moulded chin that expressed sullenness and perhaps ill-governed passions.

The bright-faced boy, Nea's first-born and darling, had sadly deteriorated during the years that he had lived under his grandfather's roof. His selfishness had taken deeper root; he had become idle and self-indulgent; his one thought was how to amuse himself best. In his heart he had no love for the old man, who had given him the shelter of his roof, and loaded him with kindness; but all the same he was secretly jealous of his cousin Erle, who, as he told himself bitterly, had supplanted him.

Percy's conscience reproached him at times for his desertion of his widowed mother. He knew that it was a shabby thing for him to be living in luxury, while she worked for her daily bread; but after all, he thought it was more her fault than his. She would have none of his gifts; she would not bend her proud spirit to seek a reconciliation with her father, though Percy felt sure that the old man had long ago repented of his harshness; and yet, when he had hinted this to his mother, she had absolutely refused to listen to him.

"It is too late, Percy. I have no father now," she had returned in her firm sad voice, and her face had looked like marble as she spoke.

Percy was rather in awe of his grandfather. Mr. Huntingdon had grown harder and more tyrannical as the years passed on. Neither of the young men ventured to oppose his iron will. He was fond of his grandson, proud of his good looks and aristocratic air, and not disposed to quarrel with him because he was a little wild. "Young men would be young men," was a favourite saying of his; he had used it before in the case of Lord Ronald Gower.

But his nephew Erle was really dearer to the old man's heart. But then every one liked Erle Huntingdon, he was so sweet-tempered and full of life, so honest and frank, and so thoroughly unselfish.

He was somewhat short, at least beside Percy, and his pleasant boyish face had no special claims to good looks. He had the ruddy youthful air of a young David, and there was something of the innocence of the sheep-fold about him.

All women liked Erle Huntingdon. He was so gentle and chivalrous in his manner to them; he never seemed to think of himself when he was talking to them; and his *bonhomie* and gay good humour made him a charming companion.

Erle never understood himself how caressing his manners could be at times. He liked all women, old and young, but only one had really touched his heart. It was strange, then, that more than one hoped that she had found favour in his eyes. Erle's sunshiny nature made him a universal favourite, but it may be doubted whether any of his friends really read him correctly. Now and then an older man told him he wanted ballast, and warned him not to carry that easy good nature too far or it might lead him into mischief; but the spoilt child of fortune only shook his head with a laugh.

But in reality Erle Huntingdon's character wanted backbone; his will, not a strong one, was likely to be dominated by a stronger. With all his pleasantness and natural good

qualities he was vacillating and weak; if any pressure or difficulty should come into his life, it would be likely for him to be weighed in the balance and found wanting.

At present his life had been smooth and uneventful; he had yet to test the hollowness of human happiness, to learn that the highest sort of life is not merely to be cradled in luxury and to fare sumptuously every day. The purple and fine linen are good enough in their way, and the myrrh and the aloes and the cassia, but what does the wise man say—"Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment . . . for childhood and youth are vanity."

Erle knew that a new interest had lately come into his life; that a certain shabby room, that was yet more home-like to him than any room in Belgrave House, was always before his eyes: that a girl in a brown dress, with sweet wistful eyes, was never absent from his memory.

Neither Fern nor he owned the truth to themselves; they were ignorant as yet that they were commencing the first chapter of their life-idyll. Fern had a vague sense that the room was brighter when Erle was there looking at her with those kindly glances. She never owned to herself that he was her prince, and that she had found favour in his eyes. She was far too humble for that; but she knew the days were somehow glorified and transfigured when she had seen him, and Erle knew that no face was so lovely to him as this girl's face, no voice half so sweet in his ears, and yet people were beginning to connect his name with Miss Selby, Lady Maltravers' beautiful niece.

He was thinking of Miss Selby now as he looked across at Fern. She had taken up her work again, and Percy had thrown himself into the rocking-chair beside her with a discontented expression on his face. He was telling himself

that Miss Selby was handsome, of course strikingly handsome; but somehow she lacked this girl's sweet graciousness. Just then Fern raised her eyes, and a quick sensitive colour came into her face as she encountered his fixed glance.

"Ah, do you know, Miss Trafford," he said quickly, to put her at her ease, "I have promised to spend Christmas with my cousin, Sir Hugh Redmond. I am rather anxious to see his wife. Report says she is a very pretty girl."

"I did not know Sir Hugh Redmond was your cousin," returned Fern, without raising her eyes from her work.

"Yes, on my mother's side, but I have not been to Redmond Hall for an age. Old Hugh had rather a disappointment last year; he was engaged to another lady, and she jilted him —at least that is the popular edition of the story; but anyhow the poor old fellow seemed rather badly hit."

"And he has married so soon!" in an incredulous tone.

"Of course, caught at the rebound like many other fellows. Don't you know how the old adage runs, Miss Trafford—

> "'Shall I wasting with despaire
> Die because a woman's faire,
> If she be not faire for me,
> What care I how faire she be.'

that is the right sort of spirit, eh, Percy."

"How should I know?" returned Percy, morosely—he was evidently out of humour about something; and then, as though he feared to bring on himself one of Erle's jesting remarks, he roused himself with an effort. "Well, Toddlekins, how's Flibbertigibbet; come and sit on my knee, and I will tell you the story of Mr. Harlequin Puss-in-boots."

"My name is not Toddlekins," returned Fluff, indignantly, "and I don't care about Flibbertigibbet or Puss-in-boots; your stories are stupid, Percy, they never have any end." And then, with the capriciousness of a spoiled child, she sidled up to her chief favourite, Erle, and put her hands confidingly in his.

"When are you going to take me again to the Zoological

Gardens, Mr. Erle?" she said, in a coaxing voice; "Fern wants to go too, don't you, dear?" but her sister shook her head at her with a faint smile, and went on with her work.

"I don't see my way clear yet awhile, Pussy," replied Erle, as he smoothed Fluff's curls, and here he and Percy exchanged meaning looks; for during his grandfather's absence from town Erle had paid frequent visits to Beulah Place, and on one occasion had actually carried off the child for a day at the Zoological Gardens in spite of Fern's demur that she hardly knew what her mother would say.

"But surely you can do as you like, Mr. Erle," persisted the child, earnestly. "Percy tells us that you are so rich, and ride such beautiful horses in the Park, and that you have nothing to do but just enjoy yourself; why can't you take Fern and me to the Zoological Gardens?"

"Oh, Fluff, Fluff!" remonstrated her sister in a distressed tone, "what will Mr. Erle think of you?"

Erle had looked embarrassed at the child's speech, but Percy laughed, and the next minute he rose.

"Do you mind if I leave you for a few minutes, Fern; I have a little business that will take me about a quarter of an hour—oh, I will be back in time," as Erle seemed inclined to remonstrate; "you may depend upon it that I will not make you late for dinner, as la Belle Evelyn is to be there," and with a nod at his sister he left the room.

Fern looked a little troubled. "I hope he has not gone to meet ——" and then she flushed up and did not finish her sentence; but Erle understood her in a moment.

"Miss Davenport would not be pleased, I suppose—oh yes, of course he has gone to meet her. What a pity your mother is not here, Miss Trafford; she would have kept him in order?"

"Crystal will be so angry," replied Fern, anxiously, and dropping her voice so that Fluff should not overhear her; but the child, disappointed that her request had been refused,

had betaken herself to the farthest corner of the room with her kitten, to whom she was whispering her displeasure. "She never likes Percy to meet her or show her any attention; I have told him so over and over again, but he will not listen to me."

"I am afraid he is rather smitten with your friend Miss Davenport—she is wonderfully handsome, certainly. Yes, one cannot be surprised at Percy's infatuation—you are the gainer in one way, Miss Trafford, for Percy never came half so often until Miss Davenport lived with you."

"That makes it all the more wrong," returned Fern, firmly; "it was Percy's duty to come and see mother, and yet he stayed away for months at a time. Crystal has never encouraged him—she never will. I know in her heart she does not like Percy, and yet he will persist in harassing her."

"Faint heart ne'er won fair lady," returned Erle, lightly; and then, as he saw the tears in Fern's eyes, his manner changed. "You must not trouble yourself about it," he said, kindly; "it will be Percy's own fault if he gets badly bitten: even I, a complete stranger to Miss Davenport,—for I believe I have not seen her more than three times,—can quite endorse what you say; her manner is most repelling to Percy. He must be bewitched, I think."

"I wish he were different," she replied, with a sigh; "I know he makes mother often very unhappy, though she never says so. He seems to find fault with us for our poverty, and says hard things to mother because she will work for us all."

"Yes, I know, and yet Percy is not a bad-hearted fellow," replied Erle, in a sympathising tone; "he is terribly sore, I know, because your mother refuses his help; he has told me over and over again that with his handsome allowance he could keep her in comfort, and that he knows that his grandfather would not object. It makes him bitter—it does indeed, Miss Trafford, to have his gifts refused."

"How can we help it?" returned Fern, in a choking voice. "Percy ought to know that we cannot use any of Mr. Hunt-

ingdon's money; neither my mother nor I would ever touch a penny of it. Don't you know," struggling with her tears, "that my poor father died broken-hearted, and he might have saved him."

"Yes, I know," returned Erle, looking kindly at the weeping girl, "and I for one cannot say you are wrong. My uncle has dealt very harshly, and I fear cruelly, by his own flesh and blood—my poor mother often cried as she told me so; but she always said that it was not for us to blame him who lived under his roof and profited by his generosity. He was a benefactor to us in our trouble—for we were poor too." But here Erle checked himself abruptly, for he did not care to tell Fern that his father had been a gambler, and had squandered all his wife's property; but he remembered almost as vividly as though it were yesterday, when he was playing in their miserable lodgings at Naples, after his father's death—how a grave stern-faced man came into the room and sat down beside his mother; and one speech had reached his ears.

"Never mind all that, Beatrice, you are happier as his widow than his wife. Forget the past, and come home with me, and your boy shall be mine."

Erle certainly loved his uncle, and it always pained him to remember his wrong-doing. In his boyish generosity he had once ventured to intercede for the disinherited daughter, and had even gone so far as to implore that his uncle would never put him in Percy's place; but the burst of anger with which his words were received cowed him effectually.

"A Trafford shall never inherit my property," Mr. Huntingdon had said, with a frown so black that the boy positively quailed under it; "I would leave it all to an hospital first—never presume to speak to me of this again. Percy does not require any pity; when he leaves Oxford he will read for the Bar. We have arranged all that; he will have a handsome allowance; and with his capacity—for his tutor tells me he is a clever fellow—he will soon carve his way to fortune;" and after this, Erle certainly held his peace.

CHAPTER XIV

CRYSTAL

"I do remember it. 'Twas such a face
As Guido would have loved to look upon."
CORNWALL.

"She was as tender
As infancy and grace."
SHAKESPEARE.

FERN looked a little surprised at Erle's speech. "I did not know you had been poor too," she returned, drying her eyes, and taking up her work again.

"Yes, but I was very young, and knew little about it; my poor mother was the one to suffer. Well, she wanted for nothing when my uncle took us to Belgrave House; he was very good to her until she died; and," with a slight hesitation in his voice, "he is good to me."

"Yes, and you are right to be fond of him;" returned Fern, frankly. "Sometimes I think it is not quite kind of me to speak to you of Percy and our troubles, because it seems to cast a reflection on one you love and——" but Erle interrupted her.

"I hope you will never withhold your confidence, Miss Trafford; I should not feel that you treated me as a friend if you did not allow me to share some of your troubles. Percy and I are like brothers, and Percy's mother and sister——" but here he paused, and a flush crossed his face. How could he tell this girl that she should be as a sister to him, when he knew

that even to be alone with her for a few minutes made his heart beat with strange thrills of happiness? His sister, never!

Fern felt a little confused at the sudden pause. She wished in a vague sort of way that he would finish his sentence and tell her what he meant; the silence was becoming awkward.

Fern worked on desperately, but her cheeks were burning. Both of them felt relieved when they heard footsteps approaching—Erle especially, for some dim instinct told him that in another minute he should have betrayed himself.

Both of them rose, simultaneously, as the door opened; and at the same moment Fluff, hugging herself among the sofa cushions, whispered into the kitten's ear:

"They don't know that I heard every word. One of these days I shall go and see grandpapa, and ask him why we may not come and live with him as well as Percy. Erle would like it, I know; he is so fond of Fern."

Erle certainly looked a little amused as his friend entered the room accompanied by a tall dark girl, very plainly dressed. But his expression changed as he noticed Percy's moody looks, and the air of extreme haughtiness observable in the manner of his companion.

Miss Davenport was evidently very much annoyed; she shook hands with Erle, without deigning to look at him, and walked straight to the fireplace.

Fern followed her. "I am so glad you have come home so early, Crystal; Fluff and I have waited tea for you, but we hardly expected you yet."

"I am sorry you waited for me," returned the girl, who called herself Crystal Davenport, in a constrained voice; "Mrs. Norton gave me some tea, because she said I must be tired playing with the children."

"Come, we must be going, Erle," interrupted Percy, sharply, "or we shall be late for dinner. Good-bye, Fern; tell my mother I am sorry to miss her. Good evening, Miss Daven-

port;" but he hesitated, as though he did not venture to offer his hand.

"Good-night, Mr. Trafford," she returned, indifferently; but she did not turn her long neck as she spoke. And Erle contented himself with a bow.

"What is it, Crystal, dear;" asked Fern, anxiously, as the two young men left the room; but Crystal only lifted her eyebrows and glanced at Fluff, whose curly head was distinctly visible; so Fern said cheerfully, "very well, we will have our tea, and then it will be Fluff's bed-time;" and then without another word busied herself with her simple preparations.

But it was not a festive meal. In spite of all her cheery efforts Crystal sat quite silent, with a cloud on her handsome face, and Fluff had turned sulky at the mention of her bed-time. So Fern fell to thinking of Erle's look as he bade her good-night—how kind he had been to her that evening. Yes, she was glad they were friends, and that he cared to hear about their troubles. He was so unselfish, so different to other young men—Fern did not know a single young man except Erle, so her knowledge was not very reliable; and then, with an odd transition of thought, she wondered who Miss Selby could be, and why Percy called her la Belle Evelyn, and looked at Erle so mischievously.

But presently, when Fluff had gone off grumbling with her kitten, and all the pretty tea things had been washed and put away in the big corner cupboard, and the kettle was silent, and only a cricket chirped on the hearth, Fern sat down beside Crystal, and put her arm affectionately round her. "Now, you can tell me what has been troubling you, darling;" she said, in a coaxing voice.

It seemed a pity that there was no one to see the two faces, so close together; an artist would have sketched them as Night and Morning. Fern's soft English fairness made a splendid foil to Crystal's olive complexion and dark southern

colouring. The girl was superbly handsome, in spite of the bitter lines round the mouth and the hard defiant curve of the lips. As Fern spoke, her dark eyes flashed angrily.

"He has been speaking to me again," she said, in an agitated voice. "He has dared to follow me and persecute me; and he calls it love—love!" with immeasurable contempt in her tone; "and when I tell him that it is ungenerous and wrong, he complains that I have robbed him of all peace. Fern, I know he is your brother, and that I ought not to speak against him; but how am I to help hating him?"

"Oh no!" with a shudder, for Fern's gentle nature was not capable of Crystal's passion; "you must not hate poor Percy—he cannot help loving you."

"A poor sort of love," returned Crystal, scornfully; "a love that partakes too much of the owner's selfishness to be to my taste. Fern, how can he be your mother's son? he has not a grain of her noble frank nature, and from all accounts he does not take after your father."

"But he is very clever, Crystal, and Mr. Erle says he is really kind-hearted," returned Fern, in a troubled tone; "people admire and like him, and there are many and many girls, Mr. Erle says, would be ready to listen to him. He is very handsome, even you must allow that, and it is not the poor boy's fault if he has lost his heart to you."

Crystal smiled at this sisterly defence, but the next moment she said, tenderly:

"You are such a little angel of goodness yourself, Fern, that you never think people are to blame—you would always excuse them if you could; you have so little knowledge of the world, and have led such a recluse life, that you hardly know how rigid society really is; but I should have thought that even you would have thought it wrong for your brother to come here so often in your mother's absence and bring his friend with him; it is taking advantage of two defenceless girls to intrude himself and Mr. Erle on us in this way."

"But Percy never knows when mother is out," replied Fern, in a puzzled tone.

Crystal was silent; she held a different opinion, but after all she need not put these ideas into Fern's innocent mind. It was her own conviction that Percy in some way was always aware of his mother's absence. At first he had come alone, and now he always brought Erle with him, and she wanted to say a word that might put Fern on her guard; but at the present moment she was too full of her own grievance.

"You know, Fern," she continued, in a very grave voice, "if this goes on and your brother refuses to hear reason, I shall be obliged to seek another home, where I shall be free from his unmanly persecution; yes,"—as Fern uttered an incredulous exclamation,—"though I love you all so dearly, and have grown to look upon this as a home, I shall be forced to go a second time into the world."

"But Percy must hear reason," returned Fern, tearfully. "I will ask mother to talk to him, and I know Mr. Erle has given him hints. We cannot part with you, Crystal. I have never had a companion of my own age before, and mother is so often out."

"Well, well," observed Crystal, soothingly, "I have told him the truth to-night, and perhaps he will believe it; but there! we will not talk about your brother any more. And so he left you alone with Mr. Erle, Fern?"

"Oh yes, but we were not long alone," returned the girl, innocently.

"You and Mr. Erle seem good friends."

"Yes, I suppose so," rather shyly; "he was very kind to me this evening."

"Did he tell you anything about the beautiful Miss Selby who is to dine with her aunt, Lady Maltravers, at Belgrave House to-night? a cousin of Mr. Erle's, Lady Denison, is to act hostess."

"No," returned Fern, rather faintly, but she was conscious of a sharp pain as Crystal spoke.

"And yet he meets her very often. Ah, well, young men do not tell all their little secrets. Of course Mr. Erle's life is very different from ours; we are working bees, Fern, and he is a butterfly of fashion. When he comes here he makes himself very bright and pleasant, but we know nothing of his real life."

"No, of course not." But a sort of chill passed over Fern as Crystal spoke. Why did she say these sort of things so often to her? did she think it wrong for her and Mr. Erle to be friends? was she warning her, and against what? Well, it was true she knew nothing of his life except what he chose to tell her. He had never mentioned this Miss Selby, though, according to Percy's account, he met her very often. Few ladies dined at Belgrave House, but to-night she was to be there. For the first time Fern's gentle nature felt jarred and out of tune. The bright little fire had burnt hollow; there was a faint clinging mist from the fog outside; the cricket had ceased to chirp. Fern glanced round her disconsolately; how poor and shabby it must look to him, she thought, after the rooms at Belgrave House!

But the next moment she started up in a conscience-stricken way. "There is mother's step, Crystal, and we have neglected the fire; poor mother, and she will be so tired and cold." And Fern drove back her rebellious thoughts bravely, and seized the bellows and manipulated the fire, while Crystal drew up the old easy-chair, and placed a footstool. Mrs. Trafford smiled as she saw these preparations for her comfort; her pale face relaxed from its gravity as Fern waited upon her, taking off her bonnet, and smoothing the beautiful grey hair with eager-loving fingers.

"Thank you, dearest," she said, drawing down the girl's face to hers; "and now tell me what you have both been doing."

"Percy and Mr. Erle have been here," was Fern's answer, as she took her place at her mother's feet; "and Percy left his love for you, and was so sorry to miss you."

Mrs. Trafford made no comment on this piece of informa-

tion, but she glanced quickly at Crystal; perhaps something in the girl's face warned her, for she at once changed the subject, to her daughter's surprise, and, without asking any questions, began telling them about the invalid.

But after they had chatted for a few minutes, Crystal rose, and, saying that she was very tired, bade them both good-night.

Mrs. Trafford looked after the girl anxiously, and then her glance fell on her daughter. Fern was looking into the fire dreamily, and there was a sort of wistfulness in her eyes; when her mother touched her gently she started.

"My little sunbeam does not look quite so bright to-night," she said, tenderly. "I am afraid you have been tiring yourself, Fern, trying to finish Florence's frock."

"Oh no," returned the girl, quickly, and then a frank blush came to her face as she met her mother's clear searching look. "Well, I will confess, as Fluff says,"—laughing a little unsteadily; "I am afraid I was just a little bit discontented."

"You discontented, my pet?" in an incredulous voice, for Fern's sweet unselfishness and bright content made the sunshine of their humble home. There seemed no chord of fretfulness in the girl's nature; her pure health and buoyant spirits found no cause for complaint. Nea lived her youth again in her child, and she often thanked Heaven even in her desolate moments for this one blessing that had never disappointed her.

Fern pressed a little closer to her mother, and wrapped her arms round her. "But it is true, mother, I had quite a naughty fit. Crystal talked about Percy and Mr. Erle; it was not so much what she said as what she implied that troubled me, but she seemed to think that our life was so different to theirs—that we were poor people, and that they had nothing in common with us, and that it was better not to be friends. Somehow, it made me feel all at once how shabby and commonplace one's life really was."

Mrs. Trafford sighed, but there was no reproach in her

voice. "Yes, dear; I understand, it is quite natural, and I should have felt the same at your age. I wish for your sake, my darling, that things were different, but Crystal is very wise and right in trying to make you understand the barrier between Erle Huntingdon and us."

"But, mother," with a burning face, "we are gentlefolk; surely it does not matter so much that we are poor."

"The world would not endorse that, Fern," replied her mother, gently; "it is apt to turn a cold shoulder to genteel poverty. The hardest lot in life, in my opinion, is the life of a poor gentlewoman."

"But Mr. Erle does not look down upon us," persisted Fern; "or he would not come so often. He always says that no room in Belgrave House is so homelike as this room, and that he is happier here than in the houses of his grand friends."

A troubled look came to the mother's face, and involuntarily she pressed her child closer to her, as though to defend her from some threatened danger, and her voice was not quite so clear as usual as she answered:

"It is Erle's nature to say pleasant things. He is a gentlemanly kind-hearted fellow, and I am sure that we all like him very much, but I should not care for my little daughter to see too much of him. Erle Huntingdon is not the friend I would choose for you, Fern."

"But, mother,"—opening her eyes widely at this,—"if we like him, why should we not be friends?"

Mrs. Trafford hesitated; she hardly liked to disturb Fern's mind, and yet she wished to put her on her guard.

"You see, Fern," she answered, with assumed lightness, "we are poor people—very poor people; we have to work for our bread, and to be content with simple fare; but my young cousin Erle is rich—he will be his uncle's heir one day, and, no doubt, he will marry some rich, handsome girl. All the world is before him; he has only to look round him and choose

like the prince in a fairy story. You may be sure there is some gay young princess waiting for him somewhere. Are you cold, my darling?" for Fern shivered a little.

"We have let the fire get rather low," returned Fern, jumping up to replenish it; but somehow her voice was not quite under her control, and her hand was a little unsteady. "Oh yes, her mother and Crystal were right; these foolish dreams of hers could never come true; she would have to see her prince ride away some day in quest of some dark-haired princess. And yet, in the fairy stories, the real princess was often poor, and wore a shabby dress, and had golden hair, and——" but here Fern banished these thoughts resolutely, and came back to her footstool a little pale and drooping.

Mrs. Trafford's keen eyes noted everything, but she wisely forebore to continue the subject. Fern was so docile and humble, she thought so little of herself, that her mother hoped that her words would take effect. She had already given her son a hint that his friend's visits were rather too frequent; she must speak to him seriously on the subject, and appeal to his love for his sister.

She changed the subject now by asking Fern what was the matter with Crystal.

"Percy has been speaking to her again, mother; he went to meet her, when she was coming back from the Nortons', and Crystal is very, very angry with him."

Mrs. Trafford's face darkened—she looked exceedingly displeased. Was this how Percy protected his sister? leaving her alone with Erle Huntingdon while he carried out his own selfish purposes. This was worse than she had imagined; but Fern misunderstood the reason of her mother's vexation.

"It is very wrong of Percy to worry Crystal in this way, but, poor boy, I do believe he is honestly in love with her. I do wish she could care for him, it would make him so different."

"Crystal will never care for anyone; at least"—checking herself as though she had stated a fact erroneously—"she will never

care for Percy. I have told him so, and begged him not to persecute her with his attentions, as, if he persisted, she had made up her mind to seek another home. Percy was dreadfully angry when I told him this, and refused to believe me; and then he turned round on me, and accused me of want of prudence in taking a stranger under our roof, and asked me how I knew that she was a fit companion for his sister?"

"As though Crystal were not the dearest and best girl in the world," returned Fern, indignantly. "Never mind, mother, he only wanted to make you uncomfortable. He is too fond of Crystal to doubt her for a moment. I hope you told him that you were acquainted with her whole history?"

"Yes; and I informed him at the same time that you were ignorant of it, though Crystal meant to tell you herself one day. I told him that, to put his mind at rest, I could satisfy him that Crystal came of good parentage; that she had influential friends and protectors if she chose to appeal to them; that though she was apparently a lonely waif, she had in reality good friends and a most comfortable home."

"Then, I suppose, she has alienated them by that confounded temper of hers," he said, with a sneer; "but I could see he was surprised and not altogether pleased; but I wished him to know that she was not without protectors if he drove her from our roof."

"Percy is very selfish," sighed Fern. "Crystal was getting a little happier; she was beginning to look less miserable, and to take more interest in things, but this evening she has the old restless look."

"That is because she will not take my advice," returned her mother quickly. "Crystal is a dear girl, and I am very fond of her, but I think most of her troubles come from her own undisciplined nature; she is the object of the tenderest love, the most divine forgiveness; there are kind hearts waiting for her if she would only generously respond to them. She has told me her story under the seal of secrecy, as you know well, or

she would long ago have been in her right place. My heart bleeds for the friends who love her so, and are seeking her so vainly. No,"—rising as to close the subject—"I am very sorry for Crystal, but I do not pity her as you do. I have known what it is to sin, but I have not been too proud to acknowledge my error. Crystal acknowledges hers with bitter tears and most true penitence, but she will not be forgiven, 'Let me expiate my sin a little longer,' that is all she says."

"Yes, I know," whispered Fern, "she is always telling me that she does not deserve to be happy; is that true, mother?"

"My child, do any of us deserve it? Happiness is a free gift like the sunshine that rises alike 'on the evil and the good.' Do you remember your father's dying words?—'I believe in the forgiveness of sins;' ah, it is all forgiven up there—in heaven one has a Father;" and with trembling lips Nea turned away. Her punishment had been great, she told herself: she had deserted her earthly father, and now her son had deserted her. "One sows the wind to reap the whirlwind," she thought, as she mused bitterly over her boy's weakness.

CHAPTER XV

ERLE ARRIVES AT REDMOND HALL

"She hath a natural wise sincerity,
A simple truthfulness, and these have lent her
A dignity as nameless as the centre."—LOWELL.

"What thou bidd'st
Unargued I obey; so God ordains:
God is thy law; thou mine: to know no more
Is woman's happiest knowledge, and her praise."
MILTON.

LADY REDMOND sat in her "blue nestie;" but this bright winter's morning she was not alone. A better companion than her white kitten, or her favourite Nero, or even her faithful friend Pierre the St. Bernard, occupied the other velvet rocking-chair.

Outside the snow lay deep and unbroken on the terrace, the little lake was a sheet of blue ice, and the sunshine broke on its crisp surface in sparkles of light.

The avenue itself looked like the glade of some enchanted forest, with snow and icicles pendant from every bough; while above stretched the pure blue winter's sky, blue-grey, shadowless, tenderly indicative of softness without warmth, and colour without radiance.

Fay in her dark ruby dress looked almost as brilliant as the morning itself as she sat by the fire talking to her husband's cousin Erle Huntingdon, who had come down to while away an idle week or two at the old Hall.

He had been there for ten days now, and he and Fay had

become very intimate. Erle had been much struck by the singular beauty of Hugh's child-wife, and he very soon felt almost a brotherly fondness for the gentle little creature, with her soft vivacity and innocent mirth.

It had been a very pleasant ten days to both of them, to Fay especially, who led rather a lonely life.

Erle was such a pleasant companion; he was never too tired or too busy to talk to her. He was so good-natured, so frank and affectionate, so eager to wait on her and do her any little service, that Fay wondered what she would do without him.

Hugh smiled at them indulgently. It always pleased him to see his Wee Wifie happy and amused; but he thought they were like two children together, and secretly marvelled at the scraps of conversation that reached his ears. He thought it was a good thing that Fay should have a companion for her rides and drives when he was too busy to go with her himself, and somehow Hugh was always too busy now.

So Fay and Erle scoured the country together, and when the frost came they skated for hours on the little lake.

Sir Hugh stood and watched them once, and they came skimming across the ice to meet him, hand in hand, Fay looking like a bright-eyed bird in her furs.

It was delicious, Fay said, and would not Hugh join them? but her husband shook his head. When other people came to skate too, and Fay poured out tea for her friends in the damask drawing-room, he always kept near her, as in duty bound; but he took no active part in the festivities, and people wondered why Sir Hugh seemed so grave and unlike himself, and then they glanced at Fay's happy face and seemed mystified.

Erle in his heart was mystified too. He had always liked his cousin, and had looked up at him, thinking him a fine fellow; but he noticed a great change in him when he came down to the old Hall to pay his respects to the little bride. He thought Hugh looked moody and ill; that he was often

irritable about trifles. He had never noticed that sharp tone in his voice before. His cheerfulness, too, seemed forced, and he had grown strangely unsociable in his habits. Of course he was very busy, with his own estate and his wife's to look after; but he wondered why Fay did not accompany him when he rode to some distant farm, and why he shut himself up so much in his study. The old Hugh, he remembered, had been the most genial of companions, with a hearty laugh and a fund of humour; but he had never heard him laugh once in all these ten days.

Erle felt vaguely troubled in his kind-hearted way when he watched Hugh and his little wife together. Hugh's manners did not satisfy Erle's chivalrous enthusiasm. He thought he treated Fay too much like a child. He was gentle with her, he humoured her, and petted her; but he never asked her opinion, or seemed to take pleasure in her society.

"Why on earth has he married her?" he said once to himself as he paced his comfortable room rather indignantly. "He is not a bit in love with her—one sees that in a moment, and yet the poor little thing adores him. It makes one feel miserable to see her gazing at him as though she were worshipping him; and he hardly looks at her, and yet she is the prettiest little creature I have seen for a long time. How Percy would rave about her if he saw her; but I forgot, Percy's idol is a dark-eyed goddess."

"All the same," went on Erle, restlessly; "no man has any right to treat his wife as a child. Hugh never seems to want to know what Fay wishes about anything. He settles everything off-hand, and expects her to be satisfied with what he has done; and she is such a dear, gentle little thing that she never objects. It is 'yes, dear Hugh,' or 'certainly, if you wish it, Hugh,' from morning to night; somehow that sickens a fellow. I daresay she is a little childish and crude in her ideas; that aunt of hers must be a duffer to have brought her up like a little nun; but she is sensible in her way. Hugh had no

idea that she was reading the paper for an hour yesterday, that she might talk to him about that case in which he is so interested, or he would hardly have snubbed her as he did, by telling her she knew nothing about it. She looked so disappointed, poor little thing, there were tears in her eyes; but Hugh never saw them, he never does see if she is a little tired or dull, and I don't call that treating a wife well."

Erle was working himself up into quite a virtuous fit of indignation on Fay's behalf; but presently he became secretly anxious. Before the end of his visit he grew afraid that more was amiss with Hugh than he at first guessed. He had often stayed with him before, and Hugh had visited them at Belgrave House, but he had never noticed any sign of self-indulgence.

He thought Hugh was beginning to take more wine than was good for him. He complained of sleeping badly, and had recourse to narcotics. He was reckless of his health too, and worked often far into the night, and when Erle remonstrated with him, he only said he could not sleep, and he might as well occupy himself.

But in reality he never guessed, except in a vague way, the real reason for this change in his cousin. He would have been shocked and startled if he had known the strange morbid fever that was robbing Hugh of all rest.

He was hungering and thirsting for the sight of a face that he said to himself he had better never look on again; his very nearness to Margaret kept him restless, and made his life intolerable.

What a fool he had been to marry, he told himself; to let that child bind him down to this sort of life. If he could only break away for a time—if he could travel and try what change would do for him; but this quiet existence was maddening.

He was trying his fine constitution terribly, and he knew it. He would tire himself out riding over his estate, and then

sit up over his letters and accounts half the night, till his brain seemed stupefied, and yet he had no wish for sleep.

Erle told him he looked haggard and ill, but Sir Hugh only laughed at him; there was nothing the matter, he said, carelessly; he was tough, like all the Redmonds, and he had never been ill in his life. If he only slept better he should be all right, but want of sleep plays the very deuce with a man, and so on.

"If I were you, I should not touch spirits or narcotics," observed Erle, quietly; "your nerves are a little out of order. You should take things more easily, and not sit up so late; one can form the habit of sleep." But Hugh only scoffed at the notion of nerves, and during his long visit Erle saw little improvement.

He was thankful, and yet puzzled, to see that Fay did not notice the sad change in her husband. Now and then she would say to him rather timidly, as though she feared a rebuff, "You are not quite well to-day, are you, Hugh? your hand is so hot and dry; do stay quietly with me this morning, and I will read you to sleep;" but Hugh only laughed at her anxious face.

"Run away, my pet, for I am busy," he would answer. "If you want a companion, here is this idle fellow, Erle, who never did a stroke of work in his life, I believe;" and Fay would go away reluctantly.

Erle had already grown very confidential with Fay. In her gentle way she took him to task for his desultory life. Erle owned his faults very frankly; it was quite true, he said, that he had not distinguished himself at the university, and had been chiefly known there as a boating man; but he had been extremely popular in his college. "It is all very well," he grumbled, as he sat in Fay's boudoir that morning, talking to her in his usual idle fashion. "What is a fellow to do with his life; perhaps you can tell me that? Uncle ought to have let me make the grand tour, and then I could have enlarged my

mind. Ah, yes! every fellow wants change," as Fay smiled at this; "what does a little salmon-fishing in Norway signify; or a month at the Norfolk Broads?—that is all I had last year. Uncle talks of the Engadine and the Austrian Tyrol next summer, but he travels *en grand seigneur*, and that is such a bore."

Erle was perfectly willing to describe his life at Belgrave House to Fay. She was a shrewd little person in her way, and her quaint remarks were very refreshing. He even thought that he would confide in her after a fashion, and hint at a certain difficulty and complication that had come into his life; he was rather desirous of knowing her opinion; but he began in such a roundabout fashion that Fay was quite perplexed. She understood at last that he was talking about two girls, who both seemed to influence him, and for whom he had special liking; but for a long time she could not find out which was the chief favourite.

She grew impatient at last in her pretty, imperious way, and put a stop to his unsatisfactory rambling style of talk, by asking him a few downright questions.

"You are terribly vague," she said, wrinkling her forehead in a wise way, and folding her little white hands on her lap; they looked absurdly dimpled and babyish in spite of the brilliant diamond and emerald rings that loaded them. "How is a person to understand all that rigmarole? Perhaps I am stupid, but you talk so fast, you silly boy, and now tell me exactly what this Miss Selby is like; I think you said her name was Evelyn."

"Oh! I am not good at descriptions," returned Erle, pulling Nero's long glossy ears. "She is an awfully jolly girl, plenty of go in her, lights up well of an evening, and knows exactly what to say to a fellow—keeps him alive, you know; the sort of girl who will dance like a bird half the night, and get up early the next morning and have an hour's canter in the Park before breakfast."

"Ah," in a mystified tone, "she seems a very active young person; but you have not made me see her; is she tall or short, Erle?"

"Well, she is not the tall, scraggy sort, neither is she a diminutive creature, like your ladyship. Miss Selby is medium height, and has a good figure."

"Yes, and her face?" demanded Fay, with a baby frown; "you are very bad at description, Erle, very bad indeed."

"Well, she is not dark," returned Erle, desperately, "not a brunette, I mean; and she is not fair, like the other one, she has brown hair—yes, I am sure it is brown—and good features. Well, I suppose people call her exceedingly handsome, and she dresses well, and holds herself well, and is altogether a pleasant sort of young woman."

Fay's lips curled disdainfully. "I do not think I admire your description much, sir. Plenty of go in her; well, who cares for that? and lights up well of an evening, as though she were a ball-room decoration; I think she seems a frivolous sort of creature."

"Oh no," replied Erle, eagerly, for this would not do at all. Fay's little satire fell very short of the truth. "You have not hit it off exactly; Lady Maltravers is frivolous if you like—a mild edition of the renowned Mrs. Skewton, thinks of nothing but diamonds, and settlements, and all the vanities for which your worldly woman sells her soul. It is a great wonder that, with such an example before her eyes, Miss Selby is not as bad herself; but she is a wonderfully sensible girl, and never talks that sort of nonsense; why, she goes to early service, and looks after some poor people: not that she ever mentions these facts, for she is not a goody-goody sort at all."

"Oh no, she has too much go in her," returned Fay, calmly. "I was quite right when I said that she was an active young person; and now about the other one, Erle?"

"Well," Erle began again, but this time he utterly broke down; for how was he to describe this girl with her beautiful

frank mouth, and her soft smiling eyes; he had never found out their colour at all; would Fay understand if he told her of the sprightliness and sweetness that, in his opinion, made Fern so peculiarly attractive to him. But, to his astonishment, Fay grasped the whole situation in a moment.

"Oh, you need not tell me, you poor boy," she said, with a knowing nod of her head; "so it is not the young lady with the go in her, though she does dance like a bird; it is this other one with the fair hair and the pretty smile."

"How do you know, you little witch?" returned Erle, staring at her with an honest boyish blush on his face; "do you know that Miss Trafford is poor; that she makes her own gowns, and teaches the vicar's little girls; and that Miss Selby, of whom you speak so rudely, is niece to a countess?"

"Well, what of that?" responded Fay, scornfully; "if your lady-love be poor, Erle, you are rich enough for both;" but he interrupted her with an alarmed air.

"That is the worst of chattering to a woman," he said, in a lofty way. "If you give them an inch, they take an ell; who said I was in love with either of them? Do you know my uncle has spoken to me about Miss Selby: he says she is a fine girl and after his own heart; and he has given me a strong hint that an engagement with her will be greatly for my interest." But Fay turned a deaf ear to all this.

"And the fair-haired girl with the pretty smile; if you marry her, Erle?"

"In that case, my uncle would refuse to have anything more to do with me. No doubt he would disinherit me as he did his own daughter; and Percy would be his heir. Ah, it is all very well talking, Fay," and here Erle looked at her rather gloomily. "I have never learnt to work, and I should make a pretty mess of my life; it would be poor Mrs. Trafford's experience over again." And he shook his head when Fay suggested that Hugh should let him have one of his farms. He knew nothing about farming; a little Latin and Greek, a

smattering of French and German, were his chief acquirements. "I should have to turn boatman, or starve. No, no, Fay; I must not swamp my own prospects for a mere sentimental idea; and after all, Miss Selby is very nice."

Fay was very angry with him when he said this, for she had taken a curious fancy to this Fern Trafford, but Erle would not listen to her; he got up and shook himself, and walked to the window, and then very gravely proposed a game of snowballing in the avenue.

Fay thought he was serious, and expressed herself much shocked at the idea. Hugh would not like it, she was sure; one of the gardeners might see them. As it was, Hugh had told her that he was afraid the servants were not sufficiently in awe of her ever since they saw her playing hide and seek in the hall with Nero.

She confessed that she was very fond of it though, and had snowballed Nero last year in the Daintree garden, and Aunt Griselda had not been shocked at all.

"Don't you sometimes wish you were back at Daintree?" asked Erle, turning round from the window and contemplating the pretty flushed face rather curiously.

"Oh no," she returned, quickly; "how can you ask me such a question, Erle. I could not imagine life without Hugh. Does it not seem strange?" she continued, seriously; "I have only been married about five months, and yet I find it impossible to imagine myself back at the cottage without Hugh."

"Do you know," observed Erle, carelessly, as he sauntered back to the fireplace, "that I have been here ten days, and must begin to think of my return? If there be one thing I hate, it is to outstay my welcome. I should be afraid of boring you both if I stayed much longer. Well, what now?" breaking off in some surprise.

"Ah, Erle!" exclaimed Fay, sorrowfully, the smiles and the dimples disappearing in a moment, "you are surely not going away yet. What shall I do without you?" continued the poor

child. "Who will ride and drive and skate with me when you are gone?"

"Why, your husband, to be sure," returned Erle, lightly; but he was watching her as he spoke. "You have not forgotten your husband, you naughty woman."

Fay never knew why a sudden sharp pang shot through her at Erle's careless remark.

It had never occurred to her simple mind to question her husband's right to keep so entirely aloof from her, and to give her such fragments of his time. But now, as Erle spoke, a dim unconscious feeling came over her that another was usurping his rightful place; that it was her husband who ought to be riding and driving with her, and not his young cousin, but in her wifely loyalty she stifled the feeling, and spoke firmly, though with crimsoned cheeks, like the brave little woman she really was.

"Why, you extremely foolish boy," she said, "don't you know that Hugh has something better to do with his time than to waste it on me? You see," she continued, with much dignity, "he has my estate to look after as well as his own, and it is a large one, and he has no reliable bailiff."

"Dear, dear," replied Erle, with much solemnity.

"And he has to ride over to Pierrepoint on magisterial business ever so often," and here Fay stammered slightly over the long word, but recovered herself in an instant; "and he visits the infirmary, and looks after any of his people who are ill there."

Here Erle again said, "Dear, dear;" but his provoking smile died away after a glance at her face.

"And," continued Fay, her mouth quivering a little, "you must see how proud I am of being his wife, and must not think that I am sorry that he is able to spend so little of his time with me, for I would not have him neglect his duty for the world; no, no, he is far too good and noble and useful to waste his time on me;" and Fay's face wore such a sweet

tremulous smile as she spoke, that Erle whispered under his breath, "You are a darling," and went out silently, and perhaps for the first time in his life forgot to hum as he put on his fur-lined coat.

And Fay, standing alone in her little room, whispered softly, "No, no, my bonnie Hugh, your Wee Wifie loves you far too well to keep you all to herself," but during the remainder of the day she was a little quieter than usual; and Erle missed the gentle fun that rippled into such a stream of girlish talk. He had no idea that every now and then his words came back to her with a little throb of pain, "You have your husband, Fay."

Yes, she had her husband; but would the time ever come to the girl-wife when she should know she had him, but that she could not hold him, when she should learn that he had given her everything but his heart, and cry out against him in that bitter waking that all was worthless to her but that?

CHAPTER XVI

FAY'S DILEMMA

"Blessing she is; God made her so;
And deeds of week-day holiness
Fall from her noiseless as the snow;
Nor hath she ever chanced to know
That aught were easier than to bless."

LOWELL.

"And through the windows of her eyes
We often saw her saintly soul,
Serene, and sad, and sorrowful,
Go sorrowing for lost Paradise."

GERALD MASSEY.

A FEW days after that Fay met with a slight accident.

The snow had been falling very heavily all night, and when Fay went to the window the next morning, she looked out on a white world, and not a vestige of the blue ice could be seen for the drifts that lay heaped on the little lake.

She called Hugh to look out with her. "What a pity," she said, sorrowfully; "for we had asked the Romney girls and the Spooners to come up and skate this afternoon. Erle is so fond of young ladies, and he admires Dora Spooner immensely, and now I suppose there will be no skating."

"Of course the men could sweep the snow away fast enough," returned Hugh, with a hasty glance at the glorious prospect outside; there were tiny bird tracks on the white surface, some brown sparrows and a robin were hopping across the snow. Not a breath stirred the laden branches, though they drooped under their snowy festoons. "I daresay the ice

would be right enough for a little while, but the air feels milder, and there is danger of a thaw."

"Never mind, we will see how it is to-morrow, and Erle shall take me for a walk instead. I suppose," a little plaintively, "you will be too busy to come too?"

"Oh yes, far too busy," Hugh assured her, as he seated himself at the breakfast table and commenced opening his letters. Fay read hers—a few notes—and then sat silent behind her silver urn until Erle sauntered lazily into the room, and then she brightened up and began to talk.

"I think I will send off a note to the Vicarage, and ask Dora and the others to come all the same, and we will have a nice walk this morning—that is, if you do not mind, Hugh," looking at the handsome abstracted face bent over the paper; but she had to repeat her question before it reached Hugh's ear.

"Oh no! it does not matter to me," he answered, indifferently. "Ask whom you like, Fay. The Spooners and Romneys, did you say? Oh! by all means, if you want them;" but it may be doubted whether he ever heard her thanks as he buried himself in his paper again.

The dogs were delighted at the prospect of a walk, when Fay consulted them; so a merry party started down the avenue —Fay in her furs and little sealskin hat, which made her look more a child than ever, and Erle in that wonderful coat of his, lined with sable, and the two big dogs racing on before them, and ploughing with their noses in the deep cold snow.

They had walked about two miles, and were thoroughly enjoying themselves, when all at once Fay slipped.

How it happened neither of them had any idea. Fay was sure-footed, she skimmed over the frozen snow as lightly as a bird. Erle never had to offer her any assistance—he would as soon have thought of helping a robin. It must have been orange-peel, as Fay suggested—only neither of them saw any—but all the same, just as Erle was walking calmly along, striking carelessly at the branches with his dandy cane, and Fay chat-

tering and laughing in her usual fashion, all at once she slipped, and her foot seemed to double up under her, and she sank down comfortably on the snow, only with rather a pale face.

It was very awkward and embarrassing, a most unfortunate circumstance, as they were two miles from Redmond Hall, and there was Fay protesting that she did not think she could stand, much less walk; and when Erle knelt down to examine the dainty little foot, and touched it lightly, Fay turned still paler, and uttered a little cry, but the next moment she laughed.

"I am afraid I have sprained my ankle. It was very silly and awkward of me, and I cannot think how it happened. No, it is not so very painful, unless I try to move. What are we to do, Erle?"

"That is just what I don't know," he returned, disconsolately, looking down the lane, while the two dogs gazed wistfully into his face, as though they were quite aware of the dilemma, and felt very sorry for their little mistress. "I suppose you could not ride on Pierre's back, you are hardly small enough for that; and with all my goodwill I am afraid I should not succeed in carrying you two miles,—these furs are heavy, Fay,—and yet how am I to leave you sitting in the snow while I go in search of help. I suppose," with another look, that only landed him in ploughed fields, "there is not a house near, and yet this is one of the Sandycliffe lanes."

"I don't think we are far from the Grange—that curious old red-brick house we passed the other day. This lane leads to the Sandycliffe road, and I expect we are not a quarter of a mile from the village."

"All right," responded Erle, cheerfully; "I can carry you as far as that easily."

"Oh! but we must not go to the Grange," returned Fay, in rather a regretful voice. She was suffering a good deal of pain with her foot, her boot hurt her so, but she would not make a fuss. "The Ferrers are the only people who have not called on us, and Hugh would not like me to go there."

"Nonsense," replied Erle, impatiently; "what does that matter in a case like this. I suppose you think that good Samaritan ought to have left his card first before he helped that poor traveller?"

Fay tried to laugh, but it was rather an effort. "You do not understand," she said, gently; "Hugh used to know the Ferrers, and he says they are very nice people; he is the blind vicar of Sandycliffe, and his sister lives with him. I do not know whether they are old or young; but Hugh said that he had had a misunderstanding with them, and that it would be very awkward to renew the acquaintance; he does not wish me to visit them."

"Perhaps not. I daresay the Samaritan and the unfortunate traveller were not on visiting terms afterwards, but under the present agreeable circumstances we must certainly avail ourselves of the first shelter that offers itself. Hugh would quite approve of my advice, and in his absence you must allow me to judge for you;" and there was a slight peremptoriness in Erle's voice, to which Fay yielded, for she offered no resistance when he lifted her from the ground with his old playful smile.

Fay was very small and light, but her furs were heavy; still, Erle was strong and wiry, and he carried her easily enough—he actually had breath to joke too—while the two dogs bounded before him barking joyously, and actually turning in at the Grange gates of their own accord—at least Pierre did, and Nero followed him.

Erle looked up curiously at the old red-brick house, with its picturesque gables and mullioned windows, and then, as he deposited Fay on the stone seat inside the porch, and was just raising his hand to the knocker, the door opened, and a very tall man in clerical dress appeared suddenly on the threshold. Erle's hand fell to his side, and he and Fay exchanged puzzled glances; it must be Mr. Ferrers, they thought, and of course he did not know any one was there. He stood with his face turned

to the wintry sunshine, and his grand massive-looking head bowed a little. The next moment Pierre jumped up and licked his hands, and tried to put his huge paws on his shoulder, whining with delight. Mr. Ferrers started slightly. "Why, Pierre, my fine fellow, I ought to know that rough greeting of yours by this time; it is a long time since you have called at the Grange; whom have you brought with you, Pierre?" stroking the dog's noble head.

Erle came forward at once. "My cousin, Lady Redmond, has met with rather an awkward accident in one of the lanes—she has sprained her ankle, and is in great pain; may I lift her on that comfortable oak-settle by the hall fire while I go in search of help. I am Sir Hugh's cousin, Erle Huntingdon."

"Lady Redmond," ejaculated Mr. Ferrers; and Fay wondered at the sudden shadow that passed over her host's fine face. "Oh yes, bring her in, Mr. Huntingdon, but we must find a softer couch than the oak-settle. Margaret—where are you, Margaret?" and the next moment a clear, pleasant voice answered, "I am here, Raby;" and a tall, graceful-looking woman, with dead-brown hair and calm beautiful face, crossed the long hall. Fay seemed to see her coming through a sort of haze, and she put out her hands involuntarily; Margaret's voice changed as she took them. "Ah, poor child, she is faint. Will you bring her into my morning room, Mr. Huntingdon, there is an easy couch there, and a nice fire;" and Margaret led the way to a pleasant room with an old-fashioned bay window overlooking the sunny lawn and yew-tree walk; and then took off the little sealskin hat with hands that trembled slightly, and laid the pretty head with its softly ruffled hair on the cushions, and then put some wine to Fay's lips. Fay roused herself and drank some obediently, and a little colour came back to her face. "It is my foot, the boot hurts it so," she said, faintly.

"Yes, because it is so swelled," returned Miss Ferrers, in a sympathising voice. "Mr. Huntingdon, if you will ring the

bell I will ask my maid for some hot water. I think that will relieve Lady Redmond; and if you will kindly join my brother, you will find him outside. Ruth and I will soon make your cousin more comfortable;" and Erle at once took the hint.

The dainty little boot was sadly mangled before they could get it off, and Miss Ferrers uttered a pitying exclamation at the sight of the inflamed and swollen ankle. The hot fomentation was deliciously soothing, and Miss Ferrers' manipulations so soft and skilful, that Fay was not sorry that her little protest was made without success.

"Don't you think your maid could do this. I do not like to trouble you so much," she said once in a deprecating voice.

"It is no trouble," returned Margaret, fixing her beautiful eyes for a moment on Fay's pale face; "I like to do it for you, Lady Redmond." Yes, she liked to do it; it gave her a strange pleasure to minister to her innocent rival, Hugh's wife. As Fay's little white foot rested in her hand, all at once a scene arose before her mind — an upper chamber, where a mild majestic Figure rose from among His wondering disciples and "girded Himself with a towel."

Ineffable condescension, divine humility, uniting for all ages the law of service and kindly ministration; bidding men to do likewise, and to wash the feet of sinners.

Margaret had stolen many a look at the pale little face resting on the cushions. What a baby face it was, she thought, and yet wonderfully pretty too; and then, as she bent over her work again, a quick throbbing pain that was almost agony, and that made her look as pale as Fay, seemed to stifle her. Hugh, her Hugh; ah, heavens! what was she thinking? another woman's husband could be nothing to her!

"Men are all alike," she thought, sadly; "even the best of them forget. Well, he is content with her now—with this little piece of innocent baby-faced loveliness. Yes," interrupting herself, sternly, "and I ought to thank God on my knees

that he is content—my own Hugh, whom I love better than myself;" and she looked so gently and kindly at Fay that the little thing was quite pleased and grateful.

"Oh, how good you are to me," exclaimed Fay, gratefully; "and how beautifully you have bandaged my foot. It feels so much more comfortable. What a sweet old room this is, Miss Ferrers. I do like that cushioned window-seat running round the bay; and oh, what lovely work," raising herself to look at an ecclesiastical carpet that was laid on the ground, perfectly strewn with the most beautiful colours, like a delicate piece of mosaic work. Mr. Ferrers, who had entered the room that moment, smiled at the sound of the enthusiastic young voice.

"What colours," cried Fay, delightedly; "what purples, and crimson, and violets. They look like clusters of jewels, or stars on a deep-blue ground."

Mr. Ferrers stooped down and touched the carpet with his large white hand.

"It is for our little church, and by all accounts it must be gorgeous. The description makes me fancy it like the robe of office that Aaron wore. It has a border of pomegranates I know. Ah, colour is one of my sister's hobbies. She agrees with Ruskin in connecting brilliant colouring with purity of mind and nobility of thought. I believe if she had her way she would wear those same crimsons and emeralds herself."

Margaret smiled indulgently. "You must not believe my brother, Lady Redmond. I am very simple in my tastes, but I love to see them on others;" and she looked at Fay's ruby dress. She had removed the heavy furred mantle, and she thought Lady Redmond looked more like a lovely child than ever in her little closely-fitting gown.

"Where is my cousin, Mr. Ferrers?" she asked with some surprise, as he placed himself in a carved arm-chair that stood near the couch.

"Mr. Huntingdon has started off for Redmond Hall. He

was afraid your husband might have returned and would be feeling anxious. He will come back in the carriage to fetch you; but as it is rather a long way by the road, and the snow is very deep, you must not look for him for another two hours. Margaret, luncheon is ready; I am going to tell Ruth to bring some up for Lady Redmond."

Fay was not sorry to have a little longer rest. She was very comfortable lying in this pleasant sunny room, and she had fallen in love with Miss Ferrers.

When they had left her to partake of the dainty little luncheon brought to her, she thought a great deal about the beautiful face that looked so pale and sad, and yet so kind. Had she known trouble, she wondered; she was quite young, and yet there was no look of youth about her. One would never speak of her as a girl, for example,—she was much too grave and staid for that; but what a sweet voice she had, very low and harmonious, and yet so clear.

Fay had forgotten her husband for the moment. Erle would explain everything to him, and of course he could not be vexed. What a tiresome thing that this misunderstanding had arisen. She must coax Hugh to put it right. She liked Miss Ferrers better than any of her neighbours. It made her feel good only to look at her.

She wondered if she could venture to hint about the estrangement, or to say how sorry she was that anything should keep them apart. She had not quite made up her mind about it when the brother and sister returned, and Mr. Ferrers asked her playfully if she meant to take a nap, or whether they should stay and talk to her.

"Oh, I would rather talk, please," with a wistful look at Margaret, who had taken up her work, and placed herself near the window. She wished she would not go so far away; but perhaps she wanted more light. But Mr. Ferrers had taken possession of the arm-chair again and seemed quite at her service, so Fay began chatting to him in her usual fashion.

"I have always admired this old house so," she said, brightly; "but I was afraid I should never see the inside, because——" but here she hesitated and hurried on. "Redmond Hall is grander and larger of course, but this seems more homelike. I liked the hall so when the door opened, and Erle carried me in. It seemed like church, with that great painted window so still and solemn, and full of scented darkness."

Margaret listened silently, but her brother answered rather sadly,

"It is always full of scented darkness to me, Lady Redmond, and a darkness that may be felt; but of course I know what you mean, for the whole house is full of the perfume of Margaret's flowers. Sometimes our friends declare that they can smell them half-way down the road, but that is nonsense. Still flowers are my sister's hobby; she cannot live without having them about her."

"A very harmless hobby, Raby!"

"Oh, it is a pretty fancy enough," he answered, smiling. "If you could walk, Lady Redmond, Margaret would show you our winter garden; the gallery upstairs is a perfect conservatory, and we walk up and down there on wet days, and call it our indoor garden."

"What a nice idea, and you live together in this dear old house; how delightful!"

Raby's smile grew perceptibly sadder.

"We were not always alone. What is it Longfellow says?

> "'There is no fireside, howsoe'er defended,
> But has one vacant chair.'

But, as you say, we live together, the old bachelor and old maiden brother and sister."

"Miss Ferrers is not an old maid," returned Fay, indignantly, on whom Margaret's stately presence had made a deep impression. "You ought not to speak so of your sister."

"Do you like the name of unappropriated blessing better, as I heard an unmarried lady called once," he asked, in an

amused voice; "but, no, that would not be true in Margaret's case, for her brother has appropriated her."

A gentle smile passed over Margaret's face. "I shall be here as long as you want me, Raby," and then, as though she would turn the subject, she asked Fay if she read much, and which were her favourite books. But she soon saw her mistake.

"I am afraid I am very stupid," returned Fay, blushing a little, "but I do not care to read very much. Aunt Griselda—she was the aunt with whom I lived until I was married—did not like me to read novels, and heavy books send me to sleep."

"I daresay you are too busy to read," interposed Raby rather hastily; "with such a household as yours to manage, you must be sufficiently employed."

"Oh, but I have not so much to do after all," replied Fay, frankly. "When I married I was terribly afraid that I should never know how to manage properly; the thoughts of accounts especially frightened me, because I knew my sums would not ever come right if I added them up a dozen times."

"Ladies generally hate accounts."

"Oh, but I have none to make up," returned Fay, with a merry laugh; "Hugh, I mean my husband, attends to them. If I have bills I just give them to him. And Mrs. Heron manages everything else; if there are any orders she goes to Sir Hugh. He says I am so young to be troubled about things, and that I don't understand how to regulate a large household. We lived in such a tiny cottage, you see, and Aunt Griselda never taught me anything about housekeeping."

"Yes, I see," observed Raby rather absently; he was wondering what Margaret would say to all this.

"I never thought things would be quite so easy," went on Fay, gaily. "Now if Hugh, I mean my husband, says two or three gentlemen are coming to dinner, I just tell Mrs. Heron so, and she tells Ellerton, and then everything is all right. Even when things go wrong, as they will sometimes, Sir Hugh does all the scolding; he says I am such a little thing that

they might only laugh at me; but I tell him I shall never be taller if I live to be an old woman."

Mr. Ferrers kept his thoughts to himself, but he said kindly, "I daresay you find plenty of little duties for yourself, Lady Redmond."

"Oh yes, I am always busy," returned Fay, seriously; "Mrs. Heron says that she is sure that I shall grow thin with so much running about, but unless I am driving or riding, or Erle is talking to me, I do believe I am never still for many minutes at a time. Oh, I do work sometimes, only one cannot work alone, and I go to the poultry-yards and the stables. Bonnie Bess always has a feed of corn from my hand once a day, and there are all the animals to visit, and the green-houses and the hot-houses, for I do like a chat with old Morison; and there is Catharine's dear little baby at the lodge, and the children at the Parkers' cottage; and I like to help Janet feed and clean my birds, because the dear little things know me. Oh yes, the day is not half long enough for all I have to do," finished Fay, contentedly.

CHAPTER XVII

"I AM ONLY WEE WIFIE"

"This would plant sore trouble
In that breast now clear,
And with meaning shadows
Mar that sun-bright face.
See that no earth poison
To thy soul come near!
Watch! for like a serpent
Glides that heart disgrace.

Ask to be found worthy
Of God's choicest gift,
Not by wealth made reckless,
Nor by want unkind;
Since on thee dependeth
That no secret rift
Mar the deep life-music
Of her guileless mind."

PHILIP STANHOPE.

RABY felt as though he were listening to a child's innocent prattle as Fay chattered on in her light-hearted way. In spite of his deep knowledge of human nature he found himself unaccountably perplexed. Margaret had spoken to him, as they sat together over their luncheon, of the flower-like loveliness of the little bride, and yet he found himself unable to understand Hugh Redmond's choice; his thoughtful, prematurely saddened nature could not conceive how any man of Hugh's age could choose such a child for his life-companion. With all her sweet looks and ways he must grow weary of her in time.

Perhaps her freshness and innocence had bewitched him;

there was something quaint and original about her naive remarks. The disappointed man might have found her brightness refreshing—her very contrast to Margaret might have been her attraction in his eyes. Well, Raby supposed that it was all right; no doubt she was an idolised little woman. Hugh seemed to keep her in a glass case; nothing was allowed to trouble her. She will be thoroughly spoilt by this sort of injudicious fondness, thought Raby, perfectly unconscious how far he was from grasping the truth.

It was Margaret who began to feel doubtful; her womanly intuition perceived that there was something wanting; she thought Lady Redmond spoke as though she were often alone.

"I suppose you are never dull?" she asked gently.

"Oh no," returned Fay, with another gay little laugh. "Of course we have plenty of callers; just now the snow has kept them away, but then I have had our cousin Erle. Oh, he is such a pleasant companion, he is so good-natured and full of fun. I shall miss him dreadfully when he goes back to London next week."

"You will have to be content with your husband's society," observed Raby, smiling. It was a pity that neither he nor Margaret saw the lovely look on Fay's face that answered this; it would have spoken to them of the underlying depths of tenderness that there was in that young heart.

"Oh yes," she returned, simply, "but then, you see, Hugh, I mean my husband, is so extremely busy, he never comes in until luncheon has been waiting for ever so long, and very often he has to go out again afterwards. Sometimes, when I know he has gone to Pierrepoint, I ride over there to meet him. He used to ride and drive with me very often when we first came home," she continued, sorrowfully, "but now he has no time. Oh, he does far too much, every one tells him so; he is so tired in the evening that he is hardly fit for anything, and yet he will sit up so late."

Raby's sightless eyes seemed to turn involuntarily to the

window where Margaret sat, her pale face bending still lower over her work. This last speech of Lady Redmond's perplexed him still more. The Hugh who had courted Margaret had been a good-natured idler in his eyes; he had heard him talk about his shooting and fishing with something like enthusiasm; he had been eager to tell the number of heads of grouse he had bagged, or to describe the exact weight of the salmon he had taken last year in Scotland, but Raby had never looked upon him as an active man of business. If this were true, Hugh's wife must spend many lonely hours, but there was no discontented chord in her bright voice.

"I feel dreadfully as though I want to help him," continued Fay. "I cannot bear to see him so tired. I asked him to let me go and visit some of the poor people who belong to us,—he is building new cottages for them, because he says that they are living in tumble-down places only fit for pigs,—but he will not hear of it; he says I am too young, and that he cannot allow me to go into such dirty places, and yet he goes himself, though he says it makes him feel quite ill."

Margaret's head drooped still lower, her eyes were full of tears; he had not forgotten then! he had promised to build those cottages when she had begged him to do so. She remembered they had chosen the site together one lovely September evening, and he had told her, laughing, that it should be his marriage gift to her. They had planned it together, and now he was carrying it out alone; for Fay owned the moment afterwards that she did not know where the new cottages were; she must ask Hugh to take her one day to see them, but perhaps he would rather that she waited until they were finished.

Margaret was beginning to feel strangely troubled; a dim but unerring instinct told her that Fay was more petted than beloved. It was evident that Hugh lived his own life separate from her, submerged in his own interests and pursuits, and her heart grew very pitiful over Fay as she realised this. If she could only meet Hugh face to face; if she could only speak to him.

She felt instinctively that things were not altogether right with him. Why did he not try to guide and train the childish nature that was so dependent on him? why did he repress all her longings to be useful to him, and to take her share of the duties of life? Surely her extreme youth was no excuse, she was not too young to be his wife. Margaret told herself sadly that here he was in error, that he was not acting up to his responsibilities, to leave this child so much alone.

Fay's frankness and simplicity were touching Margaret's heart; even this one interview proved to her that under the girlish crudities there was something very sweet and true in her nature; the petty vanities and empty frivolous aims of some women were not to be traced in Fay's conversation. Her little ripple of talk was as fresh and wholesome as a clear brook that shows nothing but shining pebbles under the bright current; the brook might be shallow, but it reflected the sunshine.

Margaret's thoughts had been straying rather sorrowfully, when a speech of Fay's suddenly roused her.

"I do wish we could be friends," she observed, rather piteously. "I am sure my husband must like you both, for he spoke so nicely about you; it is such a pity when people get to misunderstand each other."

"My dear Lady Redmond," returned Raby, kindly, "it is a pity, as you say; and we have no ill feeling to your husband; but, I daresay he is wise if he does not think it possible for us to have much intercourse. Sir Hugh and I do not agree about things," went on Raby after a slight hesitation; "perhaps he will tell you the reason some day; but you may be sure that on this point your husband knows best,"—for he felt himself in a difficulty.

"Of course Hugh is always right," returned Fay with much dignity. "When I said it was a pity, it was only because I like you both so much, and that I know I shall want to see you again."

"You are very good," replied Raby, but there was embar-

rassment in his tone; it was evident that Hugh's wife knew nothing about his previous engagement to Margaret. It was a grievous error, he told himself, for one day it must come to her ears; why, the whole neighbourhood was cognisant of the fact. She would hear it some day from strangers, and then the knowledge that her husband had not been true to her—that he had kept this secret from her—would fill her young heart with bitterness; and as these thoughts passed through his mind, Margaret clasped her hands involuntarily: "The first mistake," she murmured; "the first mistake."

Just then the sound of carriage wheels was distinctly audible on the gravel sweep before the house, and the next moment Erle entered the room.

"I am sorry to have been so long," he said, apologetically, and Fay thought he seemed a little flurried, "but Hugh asked me to go round and put off those people; they all seemed dreadfully sorry to hear of your accident, Fay."

"And Hugh?" with a touch of anxiety in her voice.

"Oh, Hugh seemed rather put out about the whole business. I think he wanted to pitch into me for not taking better care of you. How is the foot, Fay—less painful?"

"Oh yes, and I have been so comfortable; Mr. and Miss Ferrers have been so good to me. I suppose I ought to go now,"—looking regretfully at Margaret, who had laid aside her work.

"Well, I don't think we ought to lose any more time," observed Erle; "the days are so awfully short, you know, and really these roads are very bad."

"And your husband will be waiting," put in Raby.

"Poor Hugh, of course he will," returned Fay quickly. "Erle, I am afraid you will have to carry me to the carriage, unless you ask George to do so;" but Erle stoutly refused to deliver up his charge, so Fay bade good-bye to her new friends.

"Thank you so much, Miss Ferrers," she said, putting up

her face to be kissed. "I shall tell Hugh how good you have been to me. I am so sorry it is good-bye, Mr. Ferrers."

"Then we will not say it at all," he returned, heartily, as his big hand seemed to swallow up Fay's little soft fingers. "I will wish you God-speed instead, Lady Redmond. I daresay your cousin, Mr. Huntingdon, will be good enough to let us know how you are if he ever passes the Grange."

"To be sure I will," was Erle's reply to this, and then he deposited Fay in her corner of the carriage and took his place beside her. Both of them leant forward for a parting look at the brother and sister as they stood together in the porch.

"What a grand-looking pair they are," observed Erle, as they turned into the road; "don't you think Miss Ferrers is a very handsome woman, Fay? I admire her immensely."

"Oh yes, she is perfectly lovely," replied Fay enthusiastically; "she looks so sweet and good; it quite rests one to look at her. But there is something sad about them both. Mr. Ferrers does not look quite happy; once or twice he sighed quite heavily when we were talking. I suppose his being blind troubles him."

"He is a very uncommon sort of man," returned Erle, who had been much struck by the brother and sister. "He made himself very pleasant to me while you were having your foot doctored. By the by, my Fairy Queen,"—his pet name for her,—"Miss Dora gave me a message for you: she says she shall come up and see you to-morrow, as you will be a prisoner."

"That will be nice; but oh, Erle, what a pity we shall have no more delightful walks together. I hope Hugh was not really vexed about our going to the Grange."

"He was just a trifle testy," remarked Erle, quietly suppressing the fact that his cousin had surprised him much by a fit of regular bad temper. "He thinks I am not to be trusted with your ladyship any more;" and he changed the subject by a lively eulogium on the young ladies at the Vicarage, one of

whom he declared to be almost as handsome as Miss Selby; and he kept up such a flow of conversation on this topic that Fay had no opportunity to put another question.

Sir Hugh was waiting for them at the Hall door, but Fay thought he looked very grave and pale as he came to the carriage to lift her out.

"This is a very foolish business," he said, as he carried her up to her room, his strong arms hardly conscious of her weight; "how did it happen, Fay?" and she knew at once by his tone that he was much displeased.

"Erle ought to have taken better care of you; I told him so," he continued, as he placed her on the couch. "I cannot let you go running about the country with him like this; of course the lanes were slippery, he ought to have known that."

"You are vexed with me, Hugh," she said, very gently. "You think that I ought not to have gone to the Grange, but indeed I could not help myself."

"There were other houses," he stammered, not caring to meet her clear look. "I thought that you would have respected my wishes, but I see I am mistaken."

"Oh, Hugh," returned the poor child, quite heartbroken at this stern rebuke; "indeed, indeed, I never meant to disobey you, but my foot was so painful, and I felt so faint, and Erle was so peremptory with me."

"Well, well, you need not cry about it," observed her husband impatiently; "you are such a child, Fay, one can never say a word to you; I have a right to be displeased, if my wife goes against my wishes."

"I am very sorry," she answered, meekly, trying to keep back those troublesome tears; "please do not be so angry, Hugh, you know I care for nothing but to please you, and—and I don't feel quite well, and your voice is so loud."

"Very well, then, I will take myself off," in rather a huffy tone, but he relented at the sight of her pale little face, and some of his bad humour evaporated. "The fact is, you are such

a child that you don't know how to take care of yourself," he continued, sitting down by her, and letting her rest comfortably against him. "You will do yourself a mischief some day, Fay. I shall get Dr. Martin to come up and see your foot, and then, perhaps, he will give you a lecture."

"Oh no," she returned, charmed at this change of tone, for his anger had frightened her; "there is no need for that, dear, it is only a sprained ankle, and Miss Ferrers has bandaged it so beautifully, a day or two's rest will put it all right."

"But all the same, I should like to have Dr. Martin's opinion," he answered, quickly. "I am afraid you must have found it very awkward, Fay, being cast on the compassion of strangers."

"Oh no, indeed," was the eager answer; "they were so good and kind to me, Hugh; they welcomed me just as though I were an old friend. I was a little faint at first, my foot hurt me so; but when I opened my eyes, I found myself in such a lovely old room, on such an easy couch, and Miss Ferrers gave me some wine, and actually bathed my foot and bound it up herself."

"What sort of a room was it, Wee Wifie?"

Fay thought there was something odd in her husband's voice, but she had her head on his shoulder, and could not see his face, the winter dusk was creeping over the room, and only the fire-light illumined it. Hugh felt himself safe to put that question, but he could not quite control his voice.

"Oh, it was Miss Ferrers' morning-room, she told me so, and it had a bay window with a cushioned seat overlooking the garden. Oh, how lovely Miss Ferrers is, Hugh. I have never seen any one like her, never. I am sure she is as sweet and good as an angel, only I wish she did not look so sad: there were tears in her eyes once when we were talking; let me see, what were we talking about? oh, about those cottages you are building, she did look so interested—did you speak, dear?"

"No—go on," he said, huskily; but if only Fay could have seen his face.

"I feel I should love her so if I could only see more of her. I could not help kissing her when I came away, but she did not seem at all surprised. Mr. Ferrers wished me God-speed in such a nice way, too. Oh, they are dear people; I do wish you would let me know them, Hugh."

"My dear child, it is impossible," but Hugh spoke fast and nervously; "have I not already explained to you that there can be no intimacy between Redmond Hall and the Grange. When old friends quarrel as we have, it is a fatal blow to all friendship."

"You were old friends, then?" in some surprise, for he had never said as much to her before.

"Yes," he returned, reluctantly, for he had not meant to admit this fact.

"But quarrels can be made up, Hugh; if it be only a misunderstanding, surely it could be put right." But he silenced her somewhat haughtily.

"This is my affair, Fay—it is not like you to go against my wishes in this way; what can a child like you know about it? I should have thought a wife would have been willing to be guided by her husband, but you seem to think you know best."

"Oh no, Hugh"—very much ashamed at this—"I am quite sure you are always right; only"—hesitating a little as though she feared to offend him—"I should like you to tell me what the quarrel was about."

For a moment Sir Hugh remained absolutely dumb with surprise; it was as though a dove had flown in his face; he had never known Fay persistent before. If only she had asserted herself from the beginning of their married life, she would have gained more influence over her husband; if she had entrenched herself in her wifely dignity, and refused to be treated like a *child, kept in the dark* about everything, and petted, or civilly

snubbed according to her husband's moods, she would have won his confidence by this time.

Sir Hugh was quite conscious that he had been guilty of a grievous error in not telling Fay about Margaret before she became his wife; he wished he had done so from the bottom of his heart; but procrastination made the duty a far more difficult one; he felt it would be so awkward to tell her now, he could not tell how she might take it; it might make her unhappy, poor little thing; it would be a pity to dim her brightness.

He was sheltering his moral weakness under these plausible excuses, but somehow they failed to satisfy his conscience. He knew he had done a mean thing to marry Fay when his heart was solely and entirely Margaret's; what sort of blessing could attach to such a union?

But when Fay begged him to tell her the cause of his estrangement from the Ferrers, he positively shrank from the painful ordeal—he was not fit for it, he told himself, his nerves were disorganised, and Fay looked far from well; some day he would tell her, but not now; and the old sharpness was in his voice as he answered her.

"I cannot tell you; you should not tease me so, Fay. I think you might have a little faith in your husband."

"Very well, dear, I will not ask," she replied, gently; but the tears sprang to her eyes in the darkness. She would not think him hard if she could help it; of course she was young —ah, terribly young—and Hugh was so much older and wiser. The *Polite Match-Maker* had told her that husbands and wives were to have no secrets from each other; but she supposed that when the wife was so much younger it made a difference—perhaps when she got older, and knew more about things, Hugh would tell her more. She longed to grow older—it would be years before she would be twenty; why? she was only seventeen last month.

Hugh thought his Wee Wifie was tired, and tried to coax

her to go to sleep; he brought her another cushion, and attended to the fire, and then went away to leave her to her nap. Fay would rather have had him stay and talk to her, but she was too unselfish to say so; she lay in her pretty room watching the fire-light play on the walls, and thinking first of her husband and then of Margaret. She longed with a vague wistfulness that she were more like that lovely Miss Ferrers, and then, perhaps, Hugh would care to talk to her. Were the creeping shadows bringing her strange thoughts? Fay could not have told any one why there were tears on her cheeks; was the consciousness beginning to dawn upon her that she was not close enough to her husband's heart?—that she was his pet, but not his friend—that other wives whom she knew were not kept outside in the cold?

"I am not too young to understand, if Hugh would only think so," she said to herself plaintively. "How could I be, when I love him so?"

When Sir Hugh returned to the room an hour later, he was sorry to see Fay look so flushed and weary. "We shall have you ill after all this," he said, reproachfully; "why have you not been a good child and gone to sleep as I told you?"

"Because I was troubling too much. Oh, Hugh!" clasping him round the neck, and her little hands felt hot and dry, "are you sure that you are not angry with me, and that you really love me?"

"Of course I am not angry with you," in a jesting tone. "What an absurd idea, Wee Wifie."

"I like you to call me that," she answered, thoughtfully, drawing down one of his hands and laying her cheek on it; and Hugh thought as Margaret had, what a baby face it was. "I mean to grow older, Hugh, and wiser too if I can; but you must be patient with me, dear. I know I cannot be all you want just at present—I am only Wee Wifie now."

"Well, I do not wish to change her," replied Sir Hugh, with a touch of real tenderness in his voice, and then very gently he

unloosed the clinging arms. Somehow Fay's voice and look haunted him as he went downstairs. "She is a dear little thing," he said to himself as he sat in his library sorting his papers; "I wish I were a better husband to her;" and then he wondered what Margaret had thought of his Wee Wifie.

CHAPTER XVIII

ERLE'S VISIT TO THE GRANGE

"He gazed—he saw—he knew the face
Of beauty and the form of grace."

BYRON.

FAY was not very well the next day, and Sir Hugh insisted on sending for Dr. Martin; Fay was much surprised when the kind old doctor lectured her quite seriously on her imprudence; and put a veto on any more skating and riding for the present. The sprained ankle was a trifle, but all the same he told her grimly she must consider herself a prisoner for a few days—a very hard sentence to Fay, whose nimble little feet had never been still for long, and who had certainly never known a day's illness in her healthy young life; but, with her usual docility, she promised obedience. Sir Hugh was unusually busy just then. Some vexatious law-suit in which the Redmonds had been involved for a year or two, and in which both Sir Wilfred and his son had taken great interest, was just drawing to a conclusion, and he was obliged to go up to town for a few hours almost daily, and but for Erle's society, Fay would have been sadly moped; but with his usual good humour, Erle gave up his out-of-door pursuits to devote himself to her amusement.

He was always contriving odd surprises for her; the mystified servants often heard Fay's merry laugh ringing like a peal of silvery bells, and thought that there could be very little the

matter with their young mistress; sometimes these sounds were supplemented by others that were still more extraordinary.

One day Erle brought up the stable puppies,—three black-faced, snubnosed, roundabout creatures, in whom Fay had taken a kindly interest since the hour of their birth,—and to her intense delight deposited them on her lap, where they tumbled and rolled over each other with their paws in the air, protesting in puppy fashion against this invasion of their liberties.

Another time there was an extraordinary clucking to be heard outside the door, and the next moment Erle entered with a hen under each arm, and very red in the face from suppressed laughter.

"I thought you would be pining after your favourites Speckles and Tufty," he observed, with a chuckle; "so, as you could not visit the poultry-yard, my Fairy Queen, I have brought dame Partlet and her sister to visit you," and he deposited the much injured fowls on the rug.

It was unfortunate that Sir Hugh should have come in that moment; his disgusted look as he opened the door nearly sent Fay into hysterics; Speckles was clucking wildly under the sofa—Tufty taking excited flights across the room.

"How can you be so ridiculous," observed Sir Hugh, with a frown; "Fay, do you think Dr. Martin would approve of all this excitement;" but even he was obliged to check a smile at Erle's agonising attempts to catch Speckles.

Fay began to wonder what he would do next; Erle gravely assured her that if he could have induced Bonnie Bess to walk upstairs, which she would not do under any pretence, preferring to waltz on her hind legs in the hall, he would have regaled her with a sight of her favourite; but after the baby from the lodge, a half-frozen hedgehog, some white rats kept by the stable boy, and old Tom the veteran cat with half a tail, had all been decoyed into the boudoir, Erle found himself at the end of his resources.

But he used to go down to the Vicarage with a very long

face, and the result was that every afternoon there were fresh girlish faces gathering round Fay's couch. Dora Spooner would come with one of her sisters or a Romney girl to help Erle amuse the invalid.

There were delightful little tea-parties every afternoon. Janet, who waited on them, thought her mistress never seemed happier. Fay was treated as though she were a little queen; Dora, and Agnes Romney vied with each other in attentions; perhaps Erle's pleasant face and bright voice were powerful inducements in their way; the girls never seemed to think it a trouble to plough their way through the snowy lanes—they came in with glowing faces to narrate their little experiences.

"Yes, it is very uncomfortable walking; but we could not leave you alone, Lady Redmond. Mr. Huntingdon begged us so hard to come," Dora would say, and the hazel eyes looked at Erle rather mischievously.

Erle was up to his old tricks again. Fay used to take him to task when their visitors had gone.

"You are too fond of young ladies," she would say to him severely. "You will make poor Dora think you are in love with her if you pay her so much attention. Those are your London manners, I suppose, when you are with that young person who has the go in her, or with the other one with the pretty smile, of whom you say so little and think so much."

"Come, now; I do call that hard on a fellow," returned Erle, in an injured voice.

"You see I take an interest in you, my poor boy," continued Fay, with quite a matronly air. "I cannot allow you to make yourself so captivating to our country girls. What will Dora think if you go down to the Vicarage every morning with that plausible little story that no one believes? I am not dull one bit. I am laughing from morning to night, and Mrs. Heron comes up and scolds me. No; Dora will believe that you admire hazel eyes and long lashes. Poor girl, she knows *nothing about that* young person with the go in her."

"Oh, do shut up, Fay," interrupted Erle quite crossly at this. "Why do you always speak of Miss Selby in this absurd fashion? she is worth a dozen Dora Spooners. Why, the girls who were here this afternoon could not hold a candle to her."

"Oh, indeed!" was Fay's response to this, as she lay and looked at Erle with aggravating calmness.

"Why do you want to make out that girls are such duffers?" he went on in a still more ruffled tone, as though her shrewdness had hit very near the truth; "they have too much sense to think a fellow is in love with them because he has a little fun with them; you married women are so censorious," he finished, walking off in a huff; but the next moment he came back with a droll look on his face.

"Mrs. Spooner wants me to dine there to-morrow; there is to be a little dance; some of the Gowers are coming. Do you think you can spare me, Fay?"

"Oh, go away; you are all alike!" returned Fay, impatiently; "you have only to blame yourself if Mr. Spooner asks your intentions. I do not think Mr. Huntingdon would approve of Dora one bit; she is not so very handsome, she will not hold a candle to you know whom, and she has no money—a vicar with a large family cannot afford dowries to his daughter." But, as Erle had very rudely marched out of the room, she finished this little bit of worldly wisdom to empty walls.

Erle had been over to the Grange. He had mooted the question one evening when he and Sir Hugh were keeping Fay company; and, to Fay's great surprise, her husband had made no objection. "I suppose it would be right for you to call and thank them, Erle," he had said, as though he were prepared for the suggestion; "and perhaps, Fay,"—hesitating slightly,—"it might be as well for you to write a little note and say something civil after all their attention." And Fay thanked him for the permission with a radiant face, as though he had done her a personal favour, and the next day wrote the prettiest and most grateful little note, which Erle promised to deliver.

"You will be sure to keep the girls until I get back," had been his parting request when he came to fetch the dogs.

It was not exactly the sort of afternoon that Erle would have selected for a country walk—a thaw had set in, and the lanes were perfect quagmires of half-melted snow and slush, in which the dogs paddled and splashed their way with a perfect indifference to the state of their glossy coats; any amount of slush being better than enforced inaction.

"I shall have to leave you outside, my fine fellows," observed Erle, as Nero took a header into a heap of dirty-looking snow, in which he rolled delightedly. "I am afraid I shall hardly be presentable myself; but these are the joys of country life, I suppose."

But he was not at all sorry when he found himself at the Grange, and a pleasant-looking, grey-haired woman had ushered him into a room where Mr. Ferrers and his sister were sitting. It was a far larger room than the one where Fay had had her foot doctored that day, and was evidently Mr. Ferrers' peculiar sanctum—two of the walls were lined from the floor to the ceiling with well-filled bookshelves, an ordinary writing-table occupied the centre of the room; instead of the bay-window, a glass door afforded egress to the garden, and side windows on either side of the fireplace commanded a view of the yew-tree walk; a Scotch deer-hound was stretched on the rug in front of the blazing fire, and two pet canaries were fluttering about a stand of ferns.

Miss Ferrers had evidently been writing from her brother's dictation, for several letters were lying ready for the post. As Erle had crossed the hall he had distinctly heard the sound of her clear, musical voice, as she read aloud; but the book was already laid aside, and she had risen to welcome him.

Erle fancied she looked paler than on the previous occasion, and he wondered what Mr. Ferrers would have said if he had seen those dark lines under her eyes; perhaps she never told *him when she* was tired—women liked to be martyrs sometimes.

He was received very cordially; and Miss Ferrers seemed rather touched at the contents of her little note.

"It was good of Lady Redmond to write," she said to Erle with a smile; "but she makes far too much of my little services."

"Oh, that is just her way," returned Erle, candidly. "She is such a grateful little soul. Most people take all one's attentions as a matter of course; but Fay is not like that."

"Oh no, she is very sweet," observed Margaret, thoughtfully; somehow she had yearned to see that pretty, bright face again.

"She is the finest little creature that ever lived," returned Erle with boyish enthusiasm; "it is wonderful how little she thinks about herself. And she is about the prettiest girl one can see anywhere; and she is clever, too, though you would not believe it to hear her; for she always wants to make out that she can do nothing."

Mr. Ferrers smiled at this. "Lady Redmond did seem bent on proving that fact to us."

"Of course, did I not tell you so? but don't you believe her, Mr. Ferrers. Why, even Hugh, critical as he is, owns Fay is the best horsewoman in these parts. I should like to see her and Bonnie Bess in the Row; she would make a sensation there. And it is quite a treat to see her drive her ponies; she knows how to handle a horse's mouth. Why, those tiny hands of hers could hold in a couple of thoroughbreds. Oh, she is a good sort; the Spooner girls swear by her."

Miss Ferrers looked kindly at the young man; she liked to hear him vaunting his cousin's excellencies after this unsophisticated fashion. She had taken rather a fancy to this boyish, outspoken young fellow; and her brother shared this liking. She was about to put a question to him, when he suddenly started up with an exclamation, and the next moment he had crossed the room and was standing before a picture, with a very puzzled expression on his face. It was the portrait of a girl, and evidently painted by a good artist. Of course it was she,

Erle told himself after another quick look; in spite of the smiling mouth, he could not mistake her. There was the small, finely-shaped head, set so beautifully on the long neck; the coils of black hair; the dark, dreamy eyes, which always seemed to hold a shadow in them.

"I beg your pardon; but I had no idea you knew Miss Davenport," he said at last, looking at Margaret as he spoke. But it was Mr. Ferrers who answered.

"Davenport? We know no one of the name, do we, Margaret? What does Mr. Huntingdon mean? Is it some picture?"

"Yes, dear, Crystal's picture. Mr. Huntingdon seems to recognise it."

"Crystal? why, that is her name too. I have heard Miss Trafford use it a dozen times. As though there could be two faces like that"—pointing to the canvas. "She looks younger, yes, and happier, in the picture; but then, of course, one has never seen her smiling like that. But it is Miss Davenport—ay, and to the life too."

"You must be mistaken," observed Mr. Ferrers in a voice so agitated that Erle regarded him with astonishment. He was strangely pale, and the hand that was grasping the chair back was visibly trembling. "That is the portrait of our young cousin Crystal Ferrers."

"Yes, our adopted child," added Miss Ferrers, "who left our home nearly eighteen months ago."

Erle looked more puzzled than ever. "I cannot understand it," he said, in a most perplexed voice. "If she be your cousin Crystal Ferrers, why does she call herself Crystal Davenport? There can be no question of identity; that is the face of the Miss Davenport I know—the young governess who lives with the Traffords; that is the very ring she wears, too"—with another quick glance at the hand that was holding a sheaf of white lilies. But here Mr. Ferrers interrupted him.

"Will you describe that ring, Mr. Huntingdon?"

"Willingly—it is of Indian workmanship, I fancy, and has a

curiously wrought gold setting, with an emerald very deeply sunk into the centre."

"Yes, yes; it must be she," murmured Raby, and then for the moment he seemed able to say no more; only Margaret watched him, with tears in her eyes.

Erle's interest and curiosity were strongly excited. There must be some strange mystery at the bottom of this, he thought. He had always been sure that Miss Davenport had some history. She was wonderfully handsome; but with all his predilection for pretty faces he had never quite taken to her; he had regarded her with involuntary distrust.

He looked at Mr. Ferrers as he stood evidently absorbed in thought. What a grand-looking man he was, he said to himself, if he would only hold his head up, and push back the mass of dull brown hair that lay so heavily on his forehead.

There was something sad in that spectacle of sightless strength; and to those who first saw him, Raby Ferrers always seemed like some patient giant oppressed and bowed down, both physically and mentally, but grand in a certain sublime resignation that endured because he was too proud to complain.

"It must be so," he observed at last. "Margaret, I see light at last. Mr. Huntingdon,"—turning to his guest,—"I have been very rude, very uncourteous, but your words have given me a shock; you have touched accidentally on a deep trouble. Now, will you be good and kind enough to sit down and tell me all you can about Miss Davenport, as you call her."

"Certainly, if you wish it, Mr. Ferrers." And, with very few interruptions from either the brother or sister, Erle gave a full and graphic description of Crystal's present home and surroundings—all the more willingly that his listeners seemed to hang breathlessly on his words.

He described eloquently that shabby room over Mrs. Watkins', that was yet so pleasant and homelike; the mother with her worn, beautiful face, who moved like a duchess about her

poor rooms, and was only the head teacher in a girls' school. He dismissed the subject of the gentle, fair-haired Fern in a few forcible words; but he spoke of little Florence, and then of Percy, and of the curious way in which all their lives were involved.

Only once Mr. Ferrers stopped him. "And Miss Davenport teaches, you say?"

"Yes, both she and Miss Trafford have morning engagements. I think Miss Martingale, where Mrs. Trafford is, has recommended both the young ladies. There are not many gentle-people living there; the Elysian Fields and Beulah Place are not exactly aristocratic neighbourhoods. But Miss Trafford goes to the Vicarage; there are young children there; and by good luck the senior curate, Mr. Norton, wanted some help with his two little boys. Miss Davenport is a Latin scholar, and they took her on the Traffords' recommendation."

"And only her mornings are occupied? Excuse these seemingly trifling questions, Mr. Huntingdon"—with a sad smile—"but you are speaking of one who is very dear to us both."

"I will tell you all I know," returned Erle, in his kind-hearted way; "but I am only a visitor at Mrs. Trafford's. I think, at least I am sure, that they do a good deal of needlework in their spare time—embroidery for shops; they are very poor, you see. There is always work about; sometimes they are making their gowns. They are never ashamed of anything they do, they are such thorough gentlewomen. I do not think you could find a prouder woman than Mrs. Trafford anywhere, and yet she is frank and generous to a fault."

"They must be charming people," observed Margaret, thoughtfully. "Crystal has told us all this in her letters, Raby. Mr. Huntingdon's account most fully endorses hers."

"Yes," he returned, quietly, "she is in good hands; our prayers have been answered, Maggie. But now, dear, if we *have heard* all that Mr. Huntingdon can tell us about our poor [redacted] *will you* leave me with him a little, for I want to take

him into our confidence; when he knows all, he may be willing to help us." And Margaret rose without a word; but her beautiful eyes rested on Erle a moment, wistfully, as though to beg him to be patient.

And then, as the twilight crept over the room; while the girls were laughing and chatting round Fay's couch, and wondering—Dora especially—what could have happened to detain Mr. Huntingdon so late; and while the blazing pine knots threw a ruddy glow over Raby's pale face, Erle sat listening to one of the saddest stories he had ever heard.

And when it was finished they had a long talk together, and Erle told Raby about Percy's hopeless passion, and of the impatience and loathing with which Crystal seemed to turn from her handsome young lover.

"He makes his way with other girls, but not with her," went on Erle; "and yet he is clever and fascinating, and will be rich, too, some day. It seems strange, does it not, Mr. Ferrers?"

"Not to me," returned Raby, quietly; but there was a smile on his face as he spoke. "Crystal will never care for your friend, Mr. Huntingdon; it is no use his persecuting her with his attentions."

"If I could only get Percy to believe it; but he seems absolutely crazy on that point. Miss Davenport—Miss Ferrers, I mean—is not quite the style I admire; but she is superbly handsome, one must own that."

"Yes," replied Raby, with a sigh; "I always said her face would do for Vashti's. She has Italian blood in her veins; her mother was a Florentine. Oh, here comes Margaret," as the door opened and she reappeared. "Maggie, what do you think? Mr. Huntingdon has invited me to Belgrave House."

"My uncle is very hospitable, Miss Ferrers," observed Erle, with a smile at her surprise; "Percy and I can always ask our friends. He is old, and has his own rooms; so we never interfere with him. Mr. Ferrers would find himself very comfortable with us, and I would take great care of him."

"You are very good"—but rather doubtfully. "You will not go to London without me, Raby?"

"I think it will be better, Maggie. Mr. Huntingdon has promised to take me over to Beulah Place; we shall go there one evening. Oh yes, it is all arranged. Please God, I shall bring her home with me," and there was a strange, beautiful smile on his face as he spoke.

CHAPTER XIX

AMONG THE SHADOWS

"When no more the shattered senses round the throne of reason dwell
Thinking every sight a spectre, every sound a passing bell;
When the mortal desolation falleth on the soul like rain,
And the wild hell-phantoms dance and revel in the human brain."

PHILIP STANHOPE WORSELY.

IT was nearly dinner-time when Erle reached Redmond Hall; Sir Hugh had not returned from London, Ellerton told him; he had telegraphed that he might be detained all night,—my lady was in the damask drawing-room, and the young ladies had left an hour ago. Erle listened to all this, and then rushed up to his room, to make himself presentable; and the dogs slunk off evidently on the same errand.

He had to dine in solitary state by himself, while Fay ate her chicken in the big drawing-room, where the old-fashioned mirrors always reflected the tiny figure.

Fay was looking very pretty to-night, but just a trifle sad at the thought that Hugh might not be home. She had put on his favourite gown too, to do honour to her first appearance in the drawing-room; it was a lovely gown, and she looked a perfect fairy queen in it, as Erle told her when he came into the room; but somehow Erle's praise was rather flat to-night. Fay was longing for her husband; and she had only dressed to please his eyes. She played with her wedding-ring rather restlessly while Erle talked his nonsense, and then she remembered that he must be amused.

"The girls were so dreadfully disappointed," she said, trying to rouse herself; "they were very good and kind, and stayed with me until six, and then Dora said they must go; she kept looking at the door, and fancying she heard Nero bark; and then the younger one Connie—no, not Connie, it was Addie —asked so many questions about you—where you lived, and if I had ever been to Belgrave House? trying to find out things, you know; and, Erle—— I don't believe you are listening a bit," with a stamp of her little foot.

"I don't believe I was," returned Erle, frankly. "Don't be vexed, my Fairy Queen, I can't bother about the girls to-night. I want to tell you about my visit to the Grange—it is no secret, Mr. Ferrers says, and I thought you would be interested, it is such a strange affair altogether."

Well, it was not such a dull evening after all; neither of them could tell how the time had passed when Ellerton came in to say the last train had been due for some time, and, as Sir Hugh had not returned, would my lady have the house shut up; could it actually be past eleven, and Erle and she still talking about this wonderful story.

Fay's cheeks were quite pink when she bade Erle good-night; her eyes shining like stars. Oh, these dear people, she thought, how strange and sad it all was, and yet how interesting; she had made Erle describe this Crystal over and over again. She must be an odd girl, she thought—so passionate and so undisciplined, and to think she was living with the other one, with the fair hair and the pretty smile; but when she had said this there had been no answering smile on Erle's face.

"Yes," he had returned, seriously, "I have often wondered to see them such friends; they are so utterly dissimilar. Fern —Miss Trafford I mean—is gentle and yielding—more like you, Fay; and Miss Ferrers—as I suppose I ought to call her —is so high-spirited and proud. I often wonder how Percy dares to make love to her, but he seems to dare anything."

Well, Fay thought about it all when she went to bed; she

had got used to her big shadowy room by this time; she lay wide awake watching the fire-light flicker and dance on the walls; how odd that people who loved each other so much should misunderstand each other so strangely; of course Crystal loved this grand-looking Raby, and yet of her own accord she was hiding from him; and Fay thrilled with pity and affectionate sympathy, as she pondered over the sad story. She tried to tell Hugh when he returned the next day, but he was too busy, or else unwilling to listen to her.

"Yes, I know all about it—I never cared very much for the girl," he said, hastily; and then, as Fay looked intensely surprised, he added rather irritably:

"I told you we were old friends once, and of course I saw Miss Crystal when I visited at the Grange; she was never my taste—handsome, of course, but one could see she had a bit of the devil in her—she had a temper of her own if you like; and Mr. Ferrers spoiled her; he was terribly infatuated—I daresay he is still—men will be fools sometimes. There, don't keep me talking, Fay; of course every one in Sandycliffe and Singleton knows the story. I am not so sure that it was not wise of the girl to run away after all."

"Hugh must have been very intimate with them all," thought Fay when she was left alone. "How I wish he were not always too busy to talk to me. Erle says he is sure he is killing himself rushing about as he does, and he does look terribly ill. I wish he would see Dr. Martin, but of course my asking him to do so would only make him angry. It is very wrong of me, I am afraid, but I cannot help longing to know why Hugh has quarrelled with them so. I don't like to vex him, but it seems to me as though I have a right to know all that concerns my husband"—and Fay's throat swelled, and her eyes grew a little dim. "Perhaps when something happens he will think me older and talk to me more," she said; and though she was alone a rosy blush came over her face.

Fay was very sorry when the time came for Erle to go

back to Belgrave House; she would miss him sadly she knew. They had resumed their old walks and drives, and Fay paid visits to Bonnie Bess in her stable, and taught the pretty creature to follow her over the place like a dog.

Erle was sorry to go too; he had grown very much attached to his new cousin. Mr. Ferrers was to join him a little later at Belgrave House, and he promised to write and give her full particulars of their visit to Beulah Place. In his heart he had a secret longing to feel Fern's hand in his again, and to see her bright welcoming smile. "I have been here a whole month," he grumbled; "no wonder Hugh is tired of me by this time."

Fay was rather surprised then to receive a letter from him two or three days afterwards telling her that Mr. Ferrers' visit was indefinitely postponed.

"Everything has gone wrong," he wrote; "and the fates, those mischievous cross-grained old women with the one eye between them, are dead against us.

"I went over to Beulah Place the first evening just to reconnoitre, and was much disgusted to hear that Miss Davenport—Miss Ferrers I mean, only I stick to the old name from habit—was nursing one of her pupils with the measles. The little rascal—it is a boy—had refused to be nursed by any one else; and there she is in the curate's house kept in durance vile; and, to make matters worse, there is some talk of her going out of town with them.

"I wrote off to the Grange at once, and Miss Ferrers answered me. Her brother would defer his visit for the present, she said, until Miss Davenport was back in her old quarters. He was much disappointed, of course, at this delay; but he was satisfied to know that she was in good hands, and he was used to disappointments. I did feel so sorry for the poor old fellow when I read that." And the rest of the letter was filled with lively descriptions of a ball where he had met Miss Selby, *and danced with her* half the night.

Fay shook her head over this part of Erle's letter. He was an incorrigible flirt, she was afraid; but she missed him very much. The old Hall seemed very quiet without Erle's springy footsteps and merry whistle, and somehow Fay was a little quieter too.

For a change was passing over Hugh's Wee Wifie in those early spring days.

With the new hope there came a new and tender expression on her sweet face.

She grew less child-like and more womanly, and day by day there grew a certain modest dignity that became her well. Hugh was very gentle with her, and careful to guard her from all imprudence; but life was very difficult to him just then, and he could not always restrain his growing irritability.

He was ill, and yet unwilling to own anything was amiss. He scoffed at the idea that his nerves were disorganised; and with the utmost recklessness seemed bent on ruining his fine constitution.

His restlessness and inward struggles were making him thin and haggard; still any fatigue was better than inaction, he thought. Often, after a long day spent in riding over the Redmond and Wyngate estates, he would set out again, often fasting, to walk across ploughed lands and through miry lanes to visit some sick labourer, and then sit up half the night in his solitary study.

Years afterwards he owned that he never looked back on this part of his life without an inward shudder. What would have become of him, he said, if the hand of Providence had not laid him low before he had succeeded in ruining himself, body and soul?

No one but Hugh knew how often he had yielded to the temptation to drown his inward miseries in pernicious drugs; how in those solitary vigils, while his innocent child-wife was sleeping peacefully like an infant, his half-maddened brain

conjured up delirious fancies that seemed to people the dark library with haunting faces.

But he never meant to harm himself really; he would say in his sober daylight reflections he was only so very wretched. Margaret's influence had always kept him pure, and he was not the man to find pleasure in any dissipation.

No, he would not harm himself; but he wanted more to do. If he could represent his county, for example; but he had lost his seat last election to his neighbour Colonel Dacre! If he could travel; if Fay would only spare him! And then he shook his head as he thought of his unborn child.

"You look so ill, Hugh," Fay would say with tears in her eyes when he came up to wish her good-bye, "I wish you would stay with me a little."

But Hugh would only give a forced laugh, and say that his "Wee Wifie was becoming more fanciful than ever, and that he should not know what to do with her if she went on like this:" and then, kissing her hastily, and unloosening the little hands from his neck, he would go out of the room pretending to whistle.

But one evening, when they were together in the library, he fell asleep while she was talking to him, and looked so strange and flushed that Fay got frightened and tried to wake him.

"Come, Hugh," she said, softly, "it is eleven o'clock, and I cannot leave you like this, and I am so tired and sleepy, dear;" and she knelt down and put her hand under his head, and stroked back the hair from his hot forehead. But Hugh only muttered something inaudibly, and turned his face away.

And Fay, watching him anxiously, felt her heart sink with some undefined fear, and presently rang for his valet.

"Saville," she said, as the man entered the room, "I do not know what is the matter with Sir Hugh to-night, he sleeps so heavily and looks so strange. If it were not so late, and I were sure that he would not mind it, I would send for Dr. Martin."

"Nonsense," exclaimed her husband drowsily, for this threat of sending for the doctor had roused him effectually, and he managed to sit up and look at them.

"Why, what a white shaking child you look, you are not fit to be up so late, Fay; why don't you take more care of yourself."

"I was so frightened, dear," she whispered; "I could not bear to leave you. I am sure you are ill, Hugh; do let Saville help you to bed."

"Oh, is that Saville? I thought—I thought—well never mind. There is nothing the matter with me, Saville, is there?"

"No, Sir Hugh; only it is late, and I expect you are tired, as my lady said."

"Oh, but she said I was ill"—very querulously; "I have never had a day's illness in my life, have I, Saville? Mrs. Heron will know; ask Mrs. Heron—well, I think I may as well go to bed and have my sleep out."

And the next day he reiterated the same thing, that there was nothing the matter with him, nothing; only they had not called him at the usual time, and he had slept late; but he had no appetite, and did not care to rise.

It was foolish to have tired himself out so, he owned. But if Fay were good and would not scold him, she might sit with him and read something amusing. But he did not tell her, or Saville either, that he had tried to dress himself and had fallen back half fainting on the bed, or of the strange horrible feelings that were creeping over him, and that made him dread to be alone. Only Fay was very disappointed that he did not seem to hear anything she read; or remember a word of it. It was the shooting pain in his head, he told her; and then he laughed in a way that was hardly mirthful, and said he would try to sleep.

But that night he never closed his eyes, and yet the next day he would not allow Fay to send for the doctor, though she begged piteously for permission. Doctors were old women, he

said, and Dr. Martin especially. It was only the pain in his head that kept him awake and made him so feverish; but towards the evening his eyes began to shine beautifully, and he grew quite lively and talkative.

He said he was much better, if only his head and hands were not burning like live coals; and that he meant if it were fine to drive Fay out in the pony-carriage to-morrow, and they would go and call on Margaret.

Fay stared, as well she might. Did Hugh mean Miss Ferrers? she asked, timidly.

And Hugh, speaking thickly, like a drunken man, said, "Yes, certainly! and why not?" and he would ask Margaret to go with him to Shepherd's Corner to-morrow, and see Tim Hartlebury, who was lying dying or dead, he did not know which; but *apropos* to the Sudbury politics, and the old Tory member, Lord Lyndhurst of Lyndhurst, at whom the Radical party, with the publican of the "Green Drake" at their head, had shied rotten eggs, would Lady Redmond assure him that the Grange was not infested with serpents. The old hydra-headed reptile had lived there in his father's time, and there was a young brood left, he heard, that were nourished on Margaret's roses. No, he repeated, if there were serpents at the Grange they would not drive there, for he was afraid of Raby, and he hated parsons, for even blind ones could see sometimes, and they might tell tales—lies—he said, beating wildly on the bed-clothes; lies, every one of them, and would they please take away his Wee Wifie, for he was tired of her. And Fay, trembling very much, called out to Saville to come quickly, for Sir Hugh was talking so funnily, she could not make out what he meant. And Saville, as he stood and held his master's hands, thought his talk so very funny that he summoned Mrs. Heron and Ellerton at once, while the groom saddled one of the horses and galloped off for Dr. Martin; and when Dr. Martin arrived, and had seen his patient, the *mys[redacted]s* soon cleared.

Sir Hugh had brain fever; and that night Ellerton and Saville had to hold him down in his bed to prevent him throwing himself from the window. He very nearly did it once in the cunning of his madness, when they left him unguarded for a moment; and after that they had to strap him down.

They had taken his Wee Wifie from him almost by force; she had clung to him so—her poor mad Hugh, as she called him. But Mrs. Heron took the distracted young creature in her motherly arms when Dr. Martin brought her downstairs, and soothed her as though she were a child. Fay put her head down on the housekeeper's shoulder and cried until she could cry no longer. "Will he die—will my darling die?" was all she could say at first; and then she would ask piteously to go back to him.

But no one ventured to let her cross the threshold. After this there were two hospital nurses sent down from London, and Dr. Conway, a well-known physician in town, met Dr. Martin in consultation. Saville and Ellerton were always in the sick-room when wanted. Everything that money could procure, or faithful attendance could give, was lavished on the patient, but for a long time there was no improvement.

If his violence had not banished Fay from the room his miserable ravings would.

The nurses were too much accustomed to such scenes to take much notice of their patient's wild talk; but the trusty old servants, who knew their master's secret, shuddered as they heard him, for his talk was always of Margaret. He never even mentioned his Wee Wifie.

"Oh for Margaret!" he cried, to give him water to quench his thirst; for he was in torment, and no one would give him drink. Oh for Margaret's cool hand—for Maggie—for his own love, Margaret; and so on, and so on, through the long hours of that fevered dream.

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Saville had just gone downstairs for something and had left the dressing-room door ajar. Fay, gliding down the corridor in her white dress, caught sight of the half opened door, and the temptation was too strong for her; the next moment she was in the dimly lighted room, with her finger on the handle of the closed door.

It yielded to her touch at once, and Fay's hungry eyes tried to pierce through the semi-darkness.

It was the oriel chamber, and Sir Hugh lay on the very bed where, Mrs. Heron had solemnly assured Fay, many a Redmond had breathed his first and last breath. It had been found impossible to move him, but Fay did not remember this as she stood with beating heart, not daring to move a step.

It was very quiet and still—one of the strange nurses was sitting by the bed with her face toward the patient; she had not heard Fay's stealthy entrance; the next moment Fay choked back a sob that threatened to rise in her throat, for she had caught sight at last of the white changed face that lay on the pillow; and then, regardless of everything but her love and longing, she glided quickly to the bed, and kissing the wide staring eyes, laid the shaven head tenderly upon her bosom.

"Oh, my lady!" exclaimed the nurse, in a terrified voice, "this is very wrong—very wrong indeed."

"Hush,—I am his wife,—I have a right to be here. You know me, do you not, my darling Hugh?"

Poor Fay! she had her punishment then; for Hugh did not know her in the least, and seemed to shrink from her with horror; he begged her to send Margaret to him—his dear Margaret, and not stand there like some white horrible statue dressed up in grave-clothes.

"You had better go, my lady, you are only exciting him," observed the nurse, quietly; and Fay wrung her hands and hurried from the room. Saville found her crouching against

the dressing-room door, with her face hidden in her hands, and fetched Mrs. Heron at once to coax her away; but Fay hardly seemed to understand their meaning; her face had a white, strained look upon it as Mrs. Heron put her arm round her and led her tenderly to her room.

CHAPTER XX

"LITTLE JOYCE"

"In the cruel fire of sorrow
Cast thy heart, do not faint or wail,
Let thy heart be firm and steady,
Do not let thy spirit quail;
But wait till the trial be over
And take thy heart again;
For as gold is tried by fire,
A heart must be tried by pain."

ADELAIDE ANNE PROCTER.

"OH, my lady, what will Dr. Martin say?" exclaimed Mrs. Heron, as she almost lifted her young mistress on to the couch, and stood over her rubbing her cold hands. It was a warm April evening, but Fay was shivering and her teeth chattering as though with cold.

"What does it matter what he says?" returned Fay; the girl's lips were white, and there was still a scared look in her eyes. "Is that why they would not let me see him—because they have cut off his hair and made him look so unlike himself, and because he talks so strangely?"

"Yes, my lady, and for your own good, and because——" but Fay interrupted her excitedly.

"My good? as though anything could do me good while my darling husband suffers so cruelly. Oh, Mrs. Heron, would you believe it? he did not know me; he looked as though he were afraid of me, his own wife: he told me to go away and not touch him, and to send Margaret. Oh," with a sort of

restless despair in her voice, "who is this Margaret of whom he always speaks?"

Mrs. Heron's comely face paled a little with surprise—as she told Ellerton afterwards, she felt at that moment as though a feather would have knocked her down. "My heart was in my mouth," she observed, feelingly, "when I heard the pretty creature say those words, 'who is this Margaret of whom he always speaks.' Oh, I was all in a tremble when I heard her, and then all at once I remembered Miss Joyce, and it came to me as a sort of inspiration."

"Do you know who he means?" continued Fay, languidly.

"Indeed, my lady, there is no telling," returned the good housekeeper, cautiously; "it is often the case with people in fever that they forget all about the present, and just go back to past days; and so it may be Sir Hugh thinks about the little sister who died when he was a lad at school, and of whom he was so fond."

"Sir Hugh never told me he had had a sister," replied Fay, roused to some animation at this. "Was her name Margaret?"

"Yes, to be sure." But Mrs. Heron forbore to mention that the child had always been called by her second name Joyce. "Ay, she was a pretty little dear, and Master Hugh—I mean Sir Hugh—doated on her; she had the whooping-cough very badly, and Miss Joy— I mean Miss Margaret was always delicate, and it just carried her off."

"And my husband was fond of her?" was the musing reply, "and yet it seems strange that he should go back all those years and think of his baby sister."

"I don't think Dr. Martin would say it was strange if you were to ask him, my lady," was the diplomatic answer. "We might mention it to-morrow, and see what he says. You may depend upon it that folk travel backwards in their mind when the fever gets hold of their brain. Most likely he is thinking a deal of his mother and Miss Margaret, for he was always an affectionate lad was Master Hugh."

"Dear Margaret! that was what he called her."

"Ay, no doubt, precious little lamb. I can see her now, with her curly head and white frock, as she pelted Master Hugh with rose-leaves on the lawn. Now, my lady, you are only fit for bed, and there is not a morsel of colour in your face, and Ellerton says you hardly touched dinner. Now, I am going to bring you up a glass of wine and a sandwich, and you will let Janet help you undress."

Fay was too weary to resist. What did it matter, she thought again; but with her usual sweet courtesy she thanked Mrs. Heron, and tried to swallow a few mouthfuls, though they seemed to choke her, but she was glad when they left her alone. Sleep? how was she to sleep, with this nightmare of horror oppressing her? Again, the poor shaven head was lying in her bosom. She was kissing the wide staring eyes. Why had he pushed her from him? "Oh Hugh, you ought to have known me," she sobbed, as she tossed wearily in the darkness. Janet, who was sleeping in the adjoining room, heard her once and came to her bedside.

"Were you calling me, my lady?" she asked.

"No, Janet," answered the poor child. "I am only crying because I am so unhappy."

"Better go to sleep, my lady," was Janet's sympathising reply; "things seem always worse in the dark; most likely we shall hear the master is better to-morrow. Saville says he has a deal of strength in him and will cheat the doctors yet;" and somehow this homely consolation soothed Fay, and by and by she slept the unbroken sleep of youth.

Dr. Martin listened to Mrs. Heron's account with a very grave face the next morning, but he chose to make light of the whole affair to Fay.

"You hardly deserve to be told that this escapade of yours, Lady Redmond, has done our patient no harm," he observed in a half-joking voice. "Sir Hugh is quieter to-day—much quieter. I should not be surprised if there be decided im-

provement in a few hours, but," as Fay's eyes filled with tears of thankfulness, "it was a very risky thing to do, and as you deserve to be punished for it, I must insist that these ponies of yours, who are eating their heads off with idleness, shall be put in harness at once, and you will please take a long drive that will not bring you within sight of Redmond Hall for the next two hours."

Fay laughed at the Doctor's grim face, but she was ready to promise him obedience if Hugh were better; she was quite willing to take the drive; she rang and ordered the ponies at once, and took the reins in her own hands. The fresh spring sunshine was delicious; the soft breezes seemed laden with messages of hope. Dr. Martin was right when he ordered that drive. Fay's little pale face looked less miserable as she restrained her ponies' frolics. She found herself listening to the birds and noticing the young spring foliage with her old interest as they drove through the leafy lanes. Fay had just turned her ponies' heads towards a winding road that led straight to the shore, when the frisky little animals shied playfully at a lady in a grey cloak who was standing by the hedge looking at a nest of young linnets. As she turned Fay saw that it was Miss Ferrers, and involuntarily checked her ponies, and at the same moment Miss Ferrers stepped into the road.

"Oh, Lady Redmond," she said, and Fay wondered why she was so pale. Had she been ill too? "This is a most unexpected pleasure. May I—may I"—hesitating for a moment, "ask you to stop and speak to me?"

"Certainly," returned Fay; and with quick impulse she handed the reins to the groom, and sprang into the road. "Take the ponies up and down, Ford; I shall not be long. I was just going down on the beach for a breath of sea-air," she continued, turning to Margaret, "and I am so glad I have met you, because we can go together," for she thought Hugh would certainly not mind her exchanging a few courte-

ous words with Miss Ferrers when they met face to face; besides Miss Ferrers had asked to speak to her.

"I wanted to know—but of course I see by your face—that Sir Hugh is better," began Margaret, but her dry lips would hardly fashion the words.

"Oh yes," returned Fay, eagerly. "Dr. Martin says he is quieter, much quieter, this morning, and he hopes to find decided improvement in a few hours; oh, Miss Ferrers, it has been such a terrible time, I do not know how I have lived through it."

"It must have been dreadful for you, and you are looking ill yourself, Lady Redmond," with a pitying glance at the small white face that looked smaller and thinner since she saw it last.

"I do not know how I have been," returned Fay, simply. "I seemed to have no feeling, the time passed somehow, it was always meal-time, and one could not eat, and then night came, but it was not always possible to sleep. I was always wandering about, and it did not seem easy to pray, and then they came and told me it was wrong to grieve so, but how could I help it?"

"Was there no one to come to you, to be with you, I mean?" but Fay shook her head.

"I did not want them. Aunt Griselda would have come, but I would not let them send for her, she would only have troubled me. Erle—Erle Huntingdon—I mean came down, but I did not want to see him; it only made me cry, so he went away, and since then I have been alone."

"Poor child," returned Margaret, softly. Yes, she was not too young to suffer; she and Raby had not done full justice to her. The childish face had lost its baby roundness; the beautiful eyes were dim with weeping; the strained white look of endurance that one sees on older faces was on hers; and, with a sudden impulse that she could not control, Margaret stooped and kissed her. "Oh, I am so sorry for you, what you must have suffered," she said, in a voice that seemed full of tears.

Fay responded to the caress most warmly. "Oh, you are

always so kind; one feels you understand without telling. I thought you would be sorry for me. Do you know I did something dreadfully wrong yesterday; they have never let me see him—they have shut me out of my husband's room—but last evening Saville left the door ajar, and I went in."

"You went in; oh, Lady Redmond!" and Margaret shuddered as though the sea breezes chilled her.

"Yes, and he did not know me; fancy a husband not knowing his wife. They had cut off his beautiful hair, and he looked so strange, and his eyes were so bright and large, and then, when I kissed him, he pushed me away. Miss Ferrers" —with a quick remembrance of the housekeeper's words—"you were old friends, at least Hugh said so; do you remember his ever speaking of a little sister who died?"

"Oh yes," returned Margaret, quickly; "little Joyce; he was very fond of her as a boy, she was a lovely little creature."

"Joyce, but her name was Margaret, Mrs. Heron says."

"To be sure, I remember now, Margaret Joyce; it is engraved so on the tombstone, but they never called her Margaret, it was always Joyce."

"How strange," replied Fay, in a puzzled tone; they were standing on a little strip of beach now, and the waves were coming in with a lazy splash and ripple; there was no one in sight, and only a little boat with sails rocking in the distance; how calm and still and peaceful it looked. "Little Joyce," she repeated dreamily, while the soft sea breeze fanned the little tendrils of hair from her temples; "but it was dear Margaret for whom he was asking."

There was a quick gasp strangled before it rose to a sob—for one moment Margaret thought she was in danger of swooning—the sky seemed whirling, the sea was all round her, the sand was nothing but a giddy circle of purple and rose, and blinding yellow; then it passed, there was firm ground under her feet, the mist cleared before her eyes, and Fay was holding *her by the arm.*

"Were you giddy? how white you looked. Shall we sit down a little? your hand is trembling still."

"It was nothing, I have not been strong lately; yes, we will sit, the air will do us both good. What were you saying, Lady Redmond?" as though the words were not burnt into her memory, "dear Margaret, why, the very angels must have wept to hear him!"

"Whom could he mean," continued Fay, with nervous reiteration. "I don't believe Mrs. Heron was right when she said that he was thinking of his baby sister; he would have called her Joyce. Margaret, there is no one that I know who has that name except yourself; but," looking at her doubtfully, "though you were old friends, it was not likely that he meant you."

A deep flush rose to Margaret's face, a quick petition for help and wisdom to guide her at this critical moment rose from her heart.

"He used to call me Margaret, in the old days," she said, in a very low voice. "That need not surprise you, Lady Redmond, as we were such old friends; his mother called me Margaret too."

"You knew his mother."

"Yes, when I was a child, Sir Hugh and I were playfellows; has he not told you that; ah, well, it is sad when old friends get estranged. Lady Redmond, I see you have a question on your lips, may I ask you not to put it. I think that it would not be acting honourably to your husband if you should hear anything from our lips; he cannot tell you himself now, but it will not hurt you to wait."

"No," replied Fay, slowly, "no, it would not hurt me to wait, as you say, but then you see Hugh may refuse to tell me, as he did before."

"Will you ask him again, and see if he refuse? will you tell him that Margaret Ferrers begs him most earnestly to tell you why Redmond Hall and the Grange are estranged? tell him, that no consideration for us need seal his lips any longer, that

he has always been free to speak, that we will willingly take our share of blame; will you tell him this?"

"Oh yes," returned Fay, in a relieved voice; "and he will be sure to tell me now; no doubt he was afraid of paining you in some way. Hugh is so kind-hearted, he hates to make any one uncomfortable. I will not try to find out any more by myself; I will be good and patient until he gets well."

"That is spoken like a brave wife," replied Margaret, with a faint smile. "By one who loves her husband more than herself."

"As I love Hugh," was the soft response, "dear Miss Ferrers, I must go now; the ponies will be growing restless, and I am a long way from home."

"Yes, I must not keep you. God bless you, Lady Redmond. Will you forgive me if I stop here, for I have been walking from Pierrepoint, and need rest," but Margaret did not add that her strength had forsaken her, and that she dared not move from her place for fear her limbs should refuse to carry her; she would wait a little until strength came back, and she could meet Raby with her usual calmness.

"Yes, you look very tired," was Fay's unconscious answer; "but you will soon get rested with this lovely air." And then she kissed her affectionately, and went up the beach with her old elastic step, and Margaret watched her sadly until she was out of sight.

"She is sweet and good, but he does not love her yet," she said to herself; "but it will come, it must come in time."

Fay drove happily home, and was met at the lodge gates by the good news that Sir Hugh had had an hour or two's refreshing sleep, and that Dr. Conway, as well as Dr. Martin, were quite satisfied with the progress he had made.

"Oh, could it be quite true," Fay asked, when she reached the Hall.

Yes, it was quite true the fever had abated. Sir Hugh's wonderful strength and vitality had triumphed at last, and the doctors soon announced that he was out of danger.

There were still days of weary waiting for Fay before it was pronounced safe for her to enter her husband's sick-room ; but at last the day came, and one sweet spring evening, Hugh waking up from a brief doze, felt tears falling on his forehead, and saw Fay leaning over him. He was too weak even to put out his hand, but a faint smile came to his lips. "My Wee Wifie," Fay heard him say, but the next moment the smile had died away into sadness.

CHAPTER XXI

"LET ME SEE MARGARET"

"Be with me, love, when weak and worn,
My life chord vibrates to and fro;
When with the flood-tide's backward flow,
My soul stands waiting to be gone.

And let me, with my failing hand,
Hold fast to that I love so well,
Till thine clasps but an empty shell,
Amid the drift-weed on the sand.

Be with me that my closing eyes
In that last hour may seek thy face,
Thine image so can none displace,
But soar with me through yonder skies."

HELEN MARION BURNSIDE.

"BUT they were not out of the wood yet," as Mrs. Heron observed to Ellerton.

When he had reached a certain point Sir Hugh failed to make any further progress.

The London physician, Dr. Conway, frankly owned that Sir Hugh's case completely baffled his medical skill and experience.

Just when they had least expected it the fever had abated, and he had begun to amend, and now he as steadily refused to get well.

Day after day he lay in an extremity of weakness that was pitiable to witness; and ever, as time went on, seemed sinking slowly from sheer inanition and exhaustion. After all there

must be some strange mischief at work, he said; but Dr. Martin was of a different opinion.

He had seen enough of his patient by this time to be sure that there was sickness of heart as well as of brain, and that it needed some other healing power than theirs before the man could throw off the load of oppression that was retarding his recovery and, gathering up his wasted energies, take up his life again.

But now he seemed very far from recovery.

Day after day he lay with that far-off look on his face that it made Fay weep to see, for she thought that he must surely die.

Hugh thought so too.

Hour by hour he felt himself drifting nearer to the dark valley which, to his tired eyes and heart, seemed only like some still haven of repose. Only to sleep, he said, to sleep—to rest—and with his white lips he murmured, "and may God have mercy on my soul." And ever he longed and prayed that he might see Margaret again.

And one night he dreamt of her.

He dreamt that he was dying,—as he surely believed he was,—and that Margaret came to his bedside and looked at him. He could see her distinctly; the pale, beautiful face, the folds of her dress, the wave of her dead-brown hair. And when he awoke and saw only the spring sunshine filling the room, and quivering light under his eyelids, and knew that the fresh day was dawning brightly to all but him, he could not suppress the groan that rose to his lips, "Margaret, Margaret."

Fay was sitting by him, but the curtain concealed her; she had been curled up for hours in the big arm-chair that stood at the head of the bed. It was her habit to rise early and go to her husband's room and send the nurse to rest; indeed, Dr. Martin had to use all his authority to induce her to take needful exercise, for Fay begrudged every moment spent out of the sick-room.

She was looking out at the avenue and listening to the soft soughing of the spring breezes in the tree-tops, and thinking of

the summer days that were to bring her a marvellous gift; but at the sound of Hugh's agonised voice her day dream vanished. "Margaret, Margaret," he had said, and then almost with a sob, "my one and only love, Margaret."

No! she was not asleep, the words were ringing in her ears. Hugh, her Hugh, had spoken them, "My one and only love, Margaret."

He must take back those words, that was her first thought. Oh no, he could not mean them; it would not be possible to go on living if she thought he meant them; but he was ill, and she must not agitate him, she must speak to him very quietly for fear the fever had returned, and his poor head was confused again.

"You have been dreaming," she said, gently—oh so gently. "What is it you want, my dearest."

And Hugh, folding his wasted hands together as though he were praying, looked up to her with unutterable longing in his eyes, and panted out "Margaret."

"Margaret," she repeated slowly; "what Margaret do you mean, Hugh?"

"Margaret Ferrers," he whispered. "Oh Fay, dear Fay, if I have wronged you, forgive me. In the old times before I knew you, Margaret and I were engaged—she had promised to be my wife, and then she took back her promise. Child, I meant to tell you, I always meant to tell you, but I did not like to grieve you by what was over and gone; but I am dying —God knows I cannot live in this weakness—let me see Margaret once, and bid her good-bye before I go."

Ah, there was no doubt now! slowly, but surely, the colour faded out of the sweet face.

If he had raised that helpless arm of his, and felled her to the ground, she could not have felt so stunned and bruised and giddy as she stood there winding and unwinding the fringe of the quilt between her cold fingers, with that strange filmy look in her eyes.

She understood it now. The arrow so feebly winged had sped to the depths of that innocent heart, and what she would not have believed if an angel had told it her, she had heard from her husband's lips.

Margaret was beloved and not she, and Fay must bear it and live.

And the fair child-face grew whiter and whiter, but she only took the nerveless hands in hers and kissed them.

"Do not fret, Hugh, it shall be as you wish," she said, in a voice so low that he only just heard her, for a sobbing breath seemed to impede her utterance; "it shall be as you wish, my dear husband," and then, not trusting herself to look at him, she left the room.

In the corridor she met Saville.

"Please find the nurse and send her to Sir Hugh," she said, hurriedly, "and tell Ford I want him to take a note over to Sandycliffe," and then she went into the library and wrote a few words.

"DEAR MISS FERRERS—My husband wishes to see you; will you come to him at once? He thinks that he is very ill, and cannot live, and he wishes to bid you good-bye. He has told me the reason, and it is quite right, and I hope you will come, for I cannot bear to see him fret."

And then she remembered that she had not ordered the pony-carriage, and that Ford would be saddling one of the horses; so she rang for Ellerton, and made him understand very carefully, that Ford was to drive over to the Grange and take the note, and that he must wait and bring Miss Ferrers back with him. "For you must know, Ellerton," she said, with pathetic dignity, but not looking at the old servant, "that Sir Hugh feels himself worse, and wants to say good-bye to his old friend, "for of course" thought Fay, when Ellerton had left the library with tears in his eyes, "if Hugh and she were engaged, all the servants must know, and it was better for me to speak out like that."

When Margaret read that poor little note the tears fell fast and blotted the page. "Thank God she knows at last," she said to herself as she folded it up, and then hurriedly prepared to obey the summons.

She hoped that she would not see Lady Redmond before that parting with Hugh were over, for she needed all her strength for that; and to her great relief only Ellerton received her. She was ushered for a few minutes into the empty drawing-room, and then Sir Hugh's nurse came down to her, and said Dr. Martin had just left the house, and her master would see Miss Ferrers now.

And there was no one in the sick-room when she entered it, though the nurse had told her that she would be in the dressing-room within call. There was no one to see the flash of joy in the sick man's eyes, when Margaret's cold lips touched his forehead, or to hear his low "Margaret, darling," that greeted her.

But when she had looked in his face she knew he would not die, and that her work was before her; and while poor weak Hugh panted out words of passionate longing and despair, she was girding up her strength for what she had to say, and praying for help that she might be able to comfort him.

And no one knew what passed between them but their guardian angels; only Hugh's miserable selfish passion sank down abashed as he listened to this brave sweet woman who was not ashamed to tell him how she loved him, and how she would love him to her life's end. And as he saw into the depths of that pure heart, its stainless purity, its unrepining sorrow, he trembled and was silent.

"What am I that I should touch even the hem of her garment?" he said to himself afterwards.

And she told him what he had never guessed, that were he free she would never marry him or any man, for in her trouble long ago she had vowed herself to heaven; and with a few forcible words she showed him the plan and purpose of her

future life—when Raby should have ceased to need her; drawing such calm pictures of a tender ministry and a saintly sisterhood, that Hugh, looking at her with dazzled eyes, thought he could almost discern a faint halo round her head.

"You were always too good for me, Margaret," he muttered, but she only smiled at him, and still holding his hands as she knelt beside him, she whispered that her prayers were heard, and that she knew he would not die, that it was only his weakness, and he would soon struggle back to life again.

"But what good is life to me without you, Margaret?" he asked, in a despairing voice.

"What good? have you forgotten your wife, Hugh?"

"No," he murmured restlessly, "but she is only a child;" but Margaret shook her head.

"You are wrong, she is not a child, nor ever will be again." And then very gently she urged him when he was stronger to tell Fay the whole story of their engagement; for she was afraid those few words that he confessed were all he had said must have made her very unhappy; but Hugh would not allow this. He told Margaret that she did not understand Fay, or how young and innocent she really was; she had not seemed agitated or disturbed when he had asked to see Margaret—she had answered him quite tranquilly; he was sure she would not suffer from the knowledge of their engagement, for he was always kind to her and she loved him; and then he added bitterly that the suffering was his, but when he got well, if he ever did get well, he would go away, for he could not go on living like this.

And when Margaret saw how it was she did not dissuade him; perhaps, after all, it would be better for him to go away for a little, and come back and begin his life anew, doing a man's work in his generation.

"One day you will love your wife," she said to him, "and indeed you cannot fail to love her, and then you will only remember that you have a sister Margaret praying for you every

day of her life. No, do not look at me like that, Hugh. Up in heaven it will be no sin to love you—I can keep my love till then." And she then tried to leave him, for, strong as she was, she could not have borne this scene much longer, and Hugh was terribly exhausted.

"Will you kiss me once more, Margaret?" he had asked, faintly, and she had stooped over him again and kissed his forehead and eyes, and then gently bade God bless him.

Was this a woman he had loved or an angel, Hugh wondered, as she closed the door and left him alone in the sunlight; but he was too weak to carry out the thought. When the nurse came to his side he had fallen into a refreshing sleep.

As Margaret crossed the threshold of the dressing-room she caught sight of a listless little figure sitting in one of the deep window-seats of the corridor. There was something in her attitude that struck Margaret—an air of deep dejection, of utter forlornness, that went to her heart. The beautiful little head seemed drooping with weariness; but as she went closer and saw the wan face and the baby mouth quivering, with the under lip pressed like a child's in pain, she gave an involuntary exclamation. She would not suffer, Hugh had said, she was so young and innocent; and now—the angels comfort your broken heart, sweet Fay.

"Hush!" she said, turning round as she heard Margaret's voice; "we must not talk here, it would disturb him, and he must be kept very quiet—oh! very quiet, Dr. Conway says. Come in here, if you wish to speak to me," and she led the way into her little room. "Will you sit down?" she went on, with the same passive gentleness; "you were good to come, but—but—it must have tired you."

"Oh! Lady Redmond——" But here Margaret could say no more. She seemed to have no strength left for this; she felt as though her calmness and fortitude were deserting her.

"I told Dr. Conway that you were coming, and he thought it would do no harm, and Dr. Martin said the same. He knows

you, he says, and he was sure that you would be very wise and quiet, that you would not excite him. No, do not tell me anything about it. I—I can trust you, and Hugh would not like me to know."

"Indeed you are mistaken," began Margaret, eagerly, but Fay checked her with a little dignity.

"Never mind that. Do you know, Miss Ferrers, that Dr. Conway says that my husband is better, that he will not die, it is only weakness and a nervous fancy; but though he is so slow in getting well, they notice a gradual improvement."

"Thank God, for your sake, Lady Redmond." But as she said this a painful flush mounted to Fay's forehead.

"You should say for his sake," she returned, quietly. "What does it matter about me? Perhaps before the summer is over we may be at rest together, baby and I."

"Lady Redmond! Oh! I cannot bear it;" and here Margaret burst into tears. Yes, she who had parted dry-eyed from her lover wept bitterly for the deceived and unhappy wife.

"Why do you cry, Miss Ferrers?" asked Fay, in the same subdued voice. "It seems to me that if God would take us both it would be so much better for us all. Nobody wants us" —and here her lips quivered—"and I should not like my baby to live without me. What could Hugh do with it, you know?"

"My child," replied Margaret, checking her sobs, "is this your faith? is this your woman's courage? Would you who love him so be content to die without winning your husband's heart?"

Fay looked at her wonderingly.

"It is yours to win," she continued. "Oh! do not look at me like that, as though I have murdered your happiness. What have you done, you poor child, that you should suffer like this for my sake. For the sake of my future peace of mind I entreat you to listen to me."

And then, as Fay did not refuse, Margaret took the listless

little hand and told her all. And she judged wisely in doing so, for it was out of her great pity for him that Fay learnt to forgive her husband, and that the vague hope arose in her heart that she might comfort and win him back. And when Margaret had finished her sad story, Fay put her arms round her and kissed her.

"Oh, I am so sorry for you; how unhappy you must have been when you gave him up; but it was noble of you, and you did it for his sake. Forgive me if I wronged you, for when you were in that room talking to him, I felt angry and bitter with him and you too; but I see it is no one's fault, only we are all so unhappy, please forgive me, for indeed you are better than I."

"There is nothing to forgive," replied Margaret, gently. "Yes, I tried to do my duty, and if your husband has failed in his, remember that he is not patient by nature, that men are not like us. One day he will be yours, and yours solely, and then you will be able to think of me without bitterness." Then, taking the little creature in her arms, she added, "Good-bye, be brave and patient and generous for your husband's sake, and it will all come right," and with a low word of blessing she let her go.

And when Hugh woke that evening from his long trance-like sleep he found his Wee Wifie as usual beside him.

She had been sitting there all day, with her great tearless eyes fixed on vacancy; refusing to take rest or food, never moving except to droop her head still lower over her clasped hands.

"You are tired, Wee Wifie," he said, as she stooped over him and asked how he felt. "You will wear yourself out, my child;" and he felt for the little hand that generally lay so near his own. Fay put it in his, and bent over him with an unsteady smile.

"I am not so very tired, and I like to take care of you," she said, with a quiver in her sweet voice. "I promised in sick-

ness as well as health, you know; let me do my duty, dear," and Hugh was silent.

But that night, while Hugh slept, and Margaret knelt praying pitiful prayers for Fay, Fay, tossing in her lonely chamber, sobbed in the desolate darkness:

"Oh, if it would please God that when the summer has come baby and I might die together; for if Hugh cannot love me, my sorrow is greater than I could bear."

CHAPTER XXII

TWO STRINGS TO ONE BOW

"Over the grass we stepped unto it,
And God He knoweth how blithe we were,
Never a voice to bid us eschew it;
Hey the green ribbon that showed so fair!

. . . . . .

"The beck grows wider, the hands must sever
On either margin, our songs all done,
We move apart, while she singeth ever
Taking the course of the stooping sun."

JEAN INGELOW.

THAT room of Mrs. Watkins' was unusually quiet that May evening, only Fern Trafford was sitting alone by the open window looking out listlessly at the few passers-by.

Fern's busy hands were idle to-night, and the work lay unheeded in her lap. There was a shadow too on the fair face, and a little pucker of anxiety on the smooth girlish forehead, as though some harassing problem were troubling her.

Fern was not quite happy in her mind. Erle Huntingdon had been there that very afternoon, but he had not stayed long, and his manner had been different somehow.

Fern was revolving the visit in rather a troubled way. She wondered if Erle's decided nervousness and want of ease had been owing to her mother's rather cool reception of him. Mrs. Trafford had not been cordial in her manner; she had treated the young man with some restraint and dignity, and had not pressed him to prolong his visit. Erle must

have felt that he was not wanted, for he had very soon risen to take his leave, and had gone away a little sadly.

Fern was too loyal to blame her mother, but she wished she had been a little kinder to poor Erle. Something was vexing him she was sure; he was not in his usual spirits. Once or twice when there had been a moment's pause, she had looked up from her work and found him watching her; and once she was sure that there were tears in his eyes. If they had only been alone she would have asked him what was the matter, and if anything was vexing him. He wanted to tell her something, she was sure, but her mother had been there all the time, and had followed him to the door herself; and though she had gone to the window for a parting look he had not once glanced up—he had walked away very fast with his head bent, as though he were absorbed in thought.

It had not been quite a happy winter to Fern. First Erle and then Crystal had been away, and she had missed them both terribly. It was not as though she had other friends to take their places, and their absence had made quite a blank in her existence.

If her mother could always stay at home and talk to her, if Fluff were older and more of a companion, she might not have missed them so much; but somehow her day-dreams were hardly as consoling as usual. They seemed more shadowy and unreal, and now and then Fern felt a little dull. Ever since her mother and Crystal had given her those hints about Erle, the girl had felt some hostile influence threatening her sweet content. Her thoughts were always straying to that unknown Evelyn Selby of whom Percy had spoken. Now and then she would question Erle about her in her innocent way, but he always evaded these questions.

"Oh yes, I see her sometimes," he would answer. "What makes you so much interested in Miss Selby? I have other lady friends, dozens and dozens of them;" and then Fern would look confused and uncomfortable, and would change the sub-

ject; but all the same this girl was never out of her thought. She was rich and well-born and beautiful, and Erle was always meeting her.

Fern tried to hide these thoughts, but Mrs. Trafford often fancied the bright face was a little clouded. Fern laughed and talked as much as ever, and worked as busily for them all; but more than once, when she had returned earlier than usual, she had found Fern with her hands lying idly in her lap, and a very thoughtful look on her face. Fern would jump up at once, with a merry laugh at her own idleness; but her mother did not always forget the look. It was far too dreamy and abstracted, she said to herself, as she watched her child tenderly.

Crystal was thinking much the same as she entered the room rather quietly that May evening—so quietly, indeed, that Fern was not conscious of her presence till she put her hand on her shoulder with a light laugh.

"Asleep, or only dreaming with your eyes open, Fern. What is the matter, little one?"

"Oh, Crystal, how you startled me," exclaimed Fern, turning crimson under Crystal's sharp scrutiny. "What made you come in so noiselessly? I never even heard your footsteps. Yes, I was dreaming, I believe," pushing back her hair with rather a tired gesture. "Fluff was sleepy and went to bed, and mother had to help Miss Martingale with the accounts, and one gets stupid sitting alone."

"I never heard you say that before," rather incredulously; "you are the brightest girl I know, Fern; your mother's name 'Little Sunshine' just suits you; you always seem to me the very essence of sunshine."

"Oh, one must be dull and stupid sometimes," returned Fern, with a suspicion of tears in her voice. "Never mind about me; tell me about your afternoon, Crystal; have you enjoyed yourself?"

"Yes—no—well, the children did. The flowers were beauti-

ful and the gardens so pretty, and there were plenty of gaily-dressed people there. Oh by the bye I saw Mr. Huntingdon, he was walking with such a handsome girl."

Fern felt an odd choking sensation in her throat. "You must have been mistaken, Crystal; Mr. Erle has been sitting with us."

"Oh yes, he told us so, for of course he came up to speak to me when Miss Selby had joined her friends; they came in very late, just as we were leaving."

"And—and—it was Miss Selby?"

"Yes, and her aunt, Lady Maltravers; and they had other people with them. I liked the look of Miss Selby, she has a nice frank face. I think she looks charming, and she walks so well too. I do like a girl to hold herself well."

"And Mr. Erle was walking with her?"

"Yes, they are evidently very intimate;" but Crystal forbore to add that Erle had looked decidedly uncomfortable at the sight of her, though he had come up to her, and had entered into conversation. She had not thought him looking either well or happy, though Miss Selby had seemed in high spirits. But she kept these thoughts to herself.

Fern did not ask any more questions. A miserable consciousness that was new to her experience kept her tongue tied.

Erle had not mentioned that he was going to the Botanical Gardens with Miss Selby; he had only muttered something about an engagement as he took his leave.

Crystal saw that Fern looked discomposed, but she took no notice. She thought the sooner that her eyes were open the better, for in her own mind she was convinced from what she had seen that afternoon that Erle Huntingdon was on the eve of an engagement to Miss Selby, if he were not actually engaged. They were quite alone when she had met them first. Lady Maltravers was sitting down at a little distance, and Miss Selby was blushing and smiling and looking excessively happy, and Crystal had been rather indignant at the sight.

"Pray do not let me keep you from your friends," she had said rather coldly when Erle came up to her. "That was Miss Selby, was it not, the tall young lady in grey with whom you were walking? what a nice face she has;" and Erle had reluctantly owned that it was Miss Selby.

"Go back to her by all means," Crystal had replied, with a touch of sarcasm in her voice; "she is looking round and wondering whom you have picked up. Oh yes, I like the look of her very much. I think you are to be congratulated, Mr. Huntingdon;" and then Erle had marched off rather sulkily.

"She looks absurdly happy, and I suppose she is in love with him; just see how she smiles at him. What fools we girls are," and Crystal had turned away, feeling very sorry for Fern in her heart, but all the same she knew better than to say a word of sympathy to Fern.

"He has made himself very pleasant to her, but it cannot have gone very deep. I do not believe Fern knows what love is," she said very bitterly to herself, and then she changed the subject.

"Oh, do you know, I had such a surprise," she continued, cheerfully, as Fern averted her face and seemed much engrossed with a Savoyard and his monkey on the opposite side of the way. "When I got to Upton House this morning I found Miss Campion had arrived unexpectedly, and of course she went with us."

"Do you mean Mrs. Norton's sister?" asked Fern, with languid curiosity.

"Yes, Aunt Addie, as the children call her; she is staying at some private hotel, and she drove over to see them. I was so pleased to see her, for you know how kind she was to me at Hastings. I do believe that she has taken a decided fancy to me, and it does seem so strange."

"It is not strange at all," exclaimed Fern, rather roused by this; "many people take a fancy to you, Crystal. I did directly mother brought you in that evening."

"Oh, you,"—smoothing the fair hair caressingly,—"you are a darling, and you love every one, but Miss Campion—well, she is quite different. One would never expect a clever woman of the world who has friends and acquaintances in all quarters of the globe to be guilty of this sort of sentimentality; but all the same," with a little laugh, "she seemed to be delighted to see me, and of course the American scheme was revived."

"Oh, Crystal," with a very long face, "I thought you had given up that idea."

"Not at all; but I wanted to hear more about it, and I could not quite make up my mind."

"You talk as though you were thinking seriously of it. Mrs. Norton would never consent to part with you."

"Mrs. Norton would do exactly what her sister wished her to do, my dear. Aunt Addie's will rules Upton House. I begin to understand things better now. We used to wonder how Mrs. Norton could afford all those pretty gowns and bonnets, and why the curate's wife was so much better dressed than the vicar's wife, and how they could afford to go out of town and have all those nice things for the children, but of course it is all Aunt Addie's doing."

"Miss Campion is rich then."

"Yes; Mrs. Norton told me all about it when we were in the gardens. She says some old uncle left her all his money. She does so much good with it; and she is especially kind to Mrs. Norton, who is her favourite sister. She has promised to send the boys to school when they are old enough, and she pays my salary, and, in fact, the whole household are much benefited by Aunt Addie. So Mrs. Norton told me rather sorrowfully that if I made up my mind to go to America with her sister they would not say a word to prevent it."

"But you will not go, dear," coaxingly.

"Miss Campion has friends in New York," returned Crystal, evasively; "but she does not mean to stay there long. She wants to see Niagara and Colorado, and I forget the route she

has planned; but a companion she must have, and she offers such handsome terms, and after all she will not be away more than five or six months, and as she says the change will do me good; the only thing is she will start early next week, and as I tell her I have nothing ready, but she only laughed and said we should have plenty of time to market in New York; and that she loved shopping."

"Crystal, I do believe that you have made up your mind to leave us."

Crystal hesitated a moment, and her dark eyes grew a little misty.

"And if it be my duty, Fern, will you say a word to keep me, my darling?" as Fern looked sorrowfully in her face. "I am not leaving you for good and all; I will never do that until——" but here she paused, and then hurried on. "The fact is, Fern, your mother can no longer protect me; your brother's unmanly persecution is driving me away. No, I will say nothing bitter of him to-night; after all he is your brother; but it will be better for him if I leave here—a brief absence may help to cure him."

"But his selfishness must not drive you away, my poor Crystal."

"Dear, it will be far better for me to go," returned Crystal with a sigh. "I am growing restless again, and, as Miss Campion says, the change will do me good; I came home to tell you this to-night. I have told Miss Campion that I will go."

"Next week!"

"Yes, probably next Wednesday or Thursday, about a week from to-day. I shall have to be very busy, you see. Don't look so pale over it, Fern; six months will soon pass. Do you know," rather sadly, "I have had such a curious feeling all day, as though something were going to happen, and that I wanted to get away first. Oh, I can't explain it; I felt the same yesterday. Fern, did Mr. Huntingdon tell you anything more about those friends of his whom he met down at Sandycliffe?"

"No, dear," with rather a wondering look, "he only just mentioned them, you know. What nice people they were, and so kind and friendly; he took rather a fancy to them."

"Yes, but I thought he might have spoken of them again."

"Oh no, he only saw them twice; he just went over to tell them how Lady Redmond's ankle was; it was only the accident that made him speak of them at all. How interested you seem in those Ferrers, Crystal."

"Yes," was the quick response; but something in her voice made Fern look at her inquiringly. "Did you—did you know them, Crystal?" she asked in some surprise.

"Yes," was again the brief answer; but after a moment's silence she said, "Fern, you have been very good, very patient all this time, you have never asked me any questions about my past life. I think as I am going away from you, and as one cannot tell what may happen, that I should like you to know my miserable story. Oh, it will be safe with you; I do not fear that for a moment; I have only hesitated all these months because of the pain of telling it, and for fear you should cease to love me if you knew of the faults I am so bitterly expiating."

"Faults," incredulously; "I have never seen them, Crystal, you always seem so good and brave and patient."

"My dear," she answered, mournfully, "appearances are deceitful sometimes. Do you remember the story of the poor demoniac whose name was Legion, and how he sat clothed and saved and in his right mind? to me it is one of the most touching and beautiful instances of the Redeemer's power. He was so galled by his chains, he was so torn and wasted by those evil spirits among the Galilean tombs. Fern," with a deep pathetic look in her eyes, "sometimes it seems to me that, thank God, the evil spirit is exorcised in me too—that there is nothing in my heart now but passionate regret for an unpremeditated sin."

"My poor dear Crystal, is it so bad as that?"

"Yes," with a sigh; "shall I tell you about it—as I told

your mother—oh, how good she was to me, how she tried to comfort me, and she had suffered so much herself. Of course, you have always known that my name is not really Davenport, but you have never guessed that it is Crystal Ferrers."

"Ferrers! Do you mean that you belong to Mr. Erle's friends, the blind clergyman who lives with his sister at the Grange?"

"Yes, I am Margaret Ferrers' cousin, the young cousin whom they adopted as their own child, and who lived with them from childhood. Well, I will tell you from the beginning, for you will never understand without hearing about my mother. Give me your hand, dear; if you are tired, and do not want to hear more, will you draw it away. I am glad it is getting dusk, so you will not see my face; the moon will rise presently, so we shall have light enough."

"One moment, Crystal; does Mr. Erle know?"

"No, of course not, he is a mere acquaintance; what should put that in your head, Fern?"

"Oh, nothing, it was only fancy," returned the girl; she hardly knew why she had put the question; was it something in Erle's manner that afternoon? He had asked her, a little anxiously, if Miss Davenport were going away again, and if she would be at home the following week. "For she had been such a runaway lately," he had said with a slight laugh, "and I was thinking that it must be dull for you when she is away." But Fern had assured him that Crystal had no intention of going away again, for she had no idea of the plot that Crystal and Miss Campion were hatching between them.

CHAPTER XXIII

CRYSTAL'S STORY

"The path my father's foot
Had trod me out (which suddenly broke off
What time he dropped the wallet of the flesh
And passed) alone I carried on, and set
My child-heart 'gainst the thorny underwood,
To reach the grassy shelter of the trees,
Ah, babe i' the wood, without a brother-babe!
My own self-pity, like the redbreast bird,
Flies back to cover all that past with leaves."

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

"I MUST begin at the very beginning, Fern," said Crystal, with a stifled sigh. "I hope I shall not weary you;" and as Fern disclaimed the possibility of fatigue with much energy, she continued: "Oh, I will be as brief as possible, but I want you to understand it all plainly.

"I have told you that Margaret Ferrers is my cousin; her father, Colonel Ferrers, had a brother much younger than himself: his name was Edmund, and he was my father.

"I recollect him very little, except that he was very kind to me, but they tell me that he was a singularly handsome man, and very accomplished, and greatly beloved by all who knew him.

"He was much younger than Uncle Rolf; he was still at college when Uncle Rolf went out to India with his wife. He distinguished himself there, and made a great many friends; his brilliant abilities attracted the notice of rather an influential

man; he offered him a secretaryship, and soon afterwards took him with him to Rome.

"There his success was even greater than it had been in London. Every one conspired to spoil and flatter the handsome young Englishman. He was admitted to the most select circles; the youthful queens of society tried to find favour in his eyes; he might have made more than one splendid match, for there was quite a *furore* about him, but he soon put a stop to his brilliant career by a most imprudent marriage, for he fell in love with a Roman flower-girl and made her his wife.

"Ah, you look shocked, Fern; society was shocked too, they had made so much of him, you see.

"People said he was mad, that Bianca's dark eyes had bewitched him; it may be so, but from the day when he first saw her tying up her roses and lilies on the steps of the fountain, to the last moment when he laid his head like a tired child on her bosom to die, he never loved any other woman but her, and he loved her well. But it was not a happy match; how could it be? it was too unequal; he had all the gentleness and calm that belonged to the Ferrers, and she—she brought him, beside her dark Madonna beauty, the fierce Italian nature, the ungovernable temper that became the heritage of her unhappy daughter."

Fern started as though she would have spoken, but Crystal only pressed her hand and went on—

"When a few months had passed over, and the fame of Bianca's great beauty had got abroad, society relaxed its frowns a little, and received its erring favourite into its arms again.

"They had left Rome and had settled at Florence, and friends began to flock round them; Bianca was only a peasant girl, but love taught her refinement, and she did not disgrace her husband's choice; but it would have been more for her happiness, and my father's too, if they had never withdrawn from the seclusion of their quiet villa.

"For very soon the fierce jealousy of her undisciplined nature began to assert itself.

"She could not endure to see her husband talk to another woman, or hear him praise one even in the most moderate terms. A mere trifle would provoke her, and then long and painful were the scenes that ensued.

"She loved him passionately; she loved him as only an Italian can love; and she made his life so bitter to him that he yielded it up almost thankfully at last. He had been very patient with her, and when he was dying, he put his hands upon her dark hair in his tender way:

"'We have not been happy together, dear,' he said, 'but I do not think it has been my fault. I loved you always, but it was hard to make you believe it; be good to our child, Bianca, for my sake.' And then, as she knelt beside him in speechless anguish and remorse, he called his little Crystal to him and kissed and blessed me, and while he was still holding my hand a sudden spasm crossed his face and he put his head down upon her shoulder, and in another moment he was gone.

"My poor mother, she did not long survive him.

"As soon as the news of my father's death reached England, Uncle Rolf wrote at once offering a home to his only brother's widow and child.

"It was my father's desire, she knew, that she should live under the protection of his relatives, so she obeyed his wishes at once. She did not hesitate for a moment, though she felt she was a dying woman, and it broke her heart to leave her husband's grave. She would bring her child to England and place her safely in Colonel Ferrers' care, and then she could go with an easy conscience to rejoin her beloved.

"How well I remember that journey; every detail was stamped upon my childish recollection.

"Alas! she never lived to reach England. She was taken very ill in Paris, and after a few days of intense suffering, she passed peacefully away.

"A kind-hearted American widow and her daughter, with whom my father had a slight acquaintance in Florence, had travelled with us and were at the same hotel, and nothing could exceed their goodness to my poor mother.

"They nursed her most tenderly, and were with her when she died, and Mrs. Stanforth promised my mother most faithfully that they would watch over me until they had seen me safe under Colonel Ferrers' care.

"Every one was kind to me. I remember once when I was sitting in a corner of the saloon with Minnie Stanforth, I heard people talking softly of the beautiful Florentine lady who lay dead up-stairs, and how some one had told them that she had died of a broken heart from the loss of her English husband.

"I was not with her when she breathed her last. Minnie had coaxed me away on some pretext or other, and when I became restless and miserable, she took me in her kind arms, and with the tears streaming from her eyes, told the truth.

"Fern, sometimes when I shut my eyes I can recall that scene now.

"I can see a child crouching in a corner of the big gaudy salon where a parrot was screaming in a gilded cage, a forlorn miserable child, with her face hidden in her hands and crying as though her little heart would break.

"I remember even now with gratitude how good the Stanforths were to me. Minnie had a little bed placed beside hers, and would often wake up in the middle of the night to soothe and comfort me, when I started from some dream in a paroxysm of childish terror and grief. Young as I was I so fretted and pined after my mother, that if we had stayed longer in Paris I should have been ill; but, as soon as the funeral was over, we started for England.

"Uncle Rolf had been prevented, by an attack of gout, coming to the funeral, but he wrote to Mrs. Stanforth giving her full instructions, and promised that if possible he would meet us at Dover.

"It was early one November morning, as I lay listlessly in my berth, that I was aroused by the noise overhead. Was the brief voyage over, I wondered; had we reached England so soon? and, weak as I was, I crawled on deck, full of languid curiosity, to see my father's country. But the first glimpse disappointed me—a leaden sea, white chalky cliffs, and a grey sky, with black ugly-looking buildings and ships looming out of a damp mist; this was all I could see of Old England. And I was turning away disconsolately when Mrs. Stanforth came up to me with a tall gentleman with a kind, brown, wrinkled face and a grey moustache.

"'Here is your little niece, Colonel Ferrers,' I heard her say in her pleasant clipping voice; 'poor little dear, she has fretted herself almost to death for her mother.' Then as I hung back, rather shyly, I felt myself lifted in my uncle's arms.

"'Little Crystal,' he said, gently, and I thought I felt a tear on my face as he kissed me, 'my poor Edmund's child.' And then, stroking my hair, 'But you shall come home with me and be my dear little daughter;' and then, as the kind hand fondled me, I crept nearer and hid my face in his coat. Dear Uncle Rolf, I loved him from that moment. The rest of the day seemed like a dream.

"We were speeding through a strange unknown country, past fields and hedge-rows, and stretches of smooth uplands, ugly ploughed lands and patches of grey sullen gloom that resembled the sea.

"Now I was gazing out blankly at the dreary landscape, and now nodding drowsily on my uncle's shoulder, till all at once we stopped under some dark trees, and a voice very close to me said, 'Let me lift her out, father.' And then some one carried me into a sudden blaze of light; and all at once I found myself in a large pleasant room with some sweet-smelling wood burning on the hearth, and a girl with dead-brown curls sewing at a little table with a white china lamp on it.

"The strong arms that had carried me in and put me on the sofa, and were now bungling over the fastenings of my heavy cloak, belonged to a tall youth with a pleasant face, that somehow attracted me.

"'Come and help me, Maggie,' he said, laughing, and then the fair mild face of Margaret bent over me.

"'Poor child, how tired she looks, Raby,' I heard her whisper, 'and so cold too, the darling;' and then she knelt down beside me and chafed my hands, and talked to me kindly; and Raby brought me some hot coffee, and stood watching me drink it, looking down at me with his vivid dark eyes, those kind beautiful eyes—oh, Raby, Raby!" and here for a moment Crystal buried her face in her hands, and Fern was grieved to see the tears were streaming through her fingers.

"Do not go on if it troubles you," she said, gently; "I am interested, oh, so interested in that poor little lonely child; but if it pains you to recall those days, you shall not distress yourself for me."

"Yes—yes—I wish to tell it, only give me one moment." And for a little while she wept bitterly; then drying her eyes, she went on in a broken voice,

"Ah, I was not lonely long; thank God, there is nothing more transitory than a child's grief, deep and inconsolable as it first appears.

"I did not forget my mother—I do not forget her now, but in a short time I threw off all traces of sadness. The change, the novelty of my life, the unfailing kindness that I experienced, soon worked a beneficial effect on my health and spirits. In a little while I ceased to regret Italy and its blue skies—and the Grange with its dear inmates became my world.

"But it was Raby who was my chief friend—my favourite playfellow.

"I loved Uncle Rolf; child as I was, I very soon learnt to reverence that simple kindly nature—that loyal heart; and Margaret was like a dear elder sister; but it was Raby who

from the first became my master and my companion; Raby who instructed and reproved and praised me; whose frown was my worst punishment; whose smile was my reward.

"It was he who implanted in me a thirst for knowledge; all the leisure moments he could snatch from his own studies were devoted to mine. During his college terms he corresponded with me, and planned out my work during his absence, sparing himself neither time nor pains; and from the night he carried me in, poor weary child, to the light and radiance of his peaceful home—he seemed to have adopted me peculiarly, until it came to be understood at the Grange that Crystal was Raby's darling and belonged especially to him.

"I think that if Margaret had not been endowed with that singular unselfishness that belonged to her nature, she must have missed something out of her life; once she had been everything to her brother, but now it was Crystal! Crystal who must bring him his books, and hunt out the words in the dictionary. Crystal who must tidy his papers, and lay the little spray of flowers beside his plate at breakfast. Crystal who must go with him on his rounds among the sick and aged—for true to the priestly office to which he proposed to dedicate himself, the young undergraduate already devoted a portion of his time to deeds of charity. Little by little in my childish selfishness I stole from her her sweetest privileges; the many little offices with which a loving woman delights to minister to the objects of her affection, be they father, brother, or husband.

"I took the stool at his feet, the low chair at his side, but she never complained; for the brother and sister understood each other most truly. In their quiet looks, I have read a mutual assurance that spoke of perfect trust and undiminished affection; Margaret could never be jealous of Raby, or Raby of Margaret.

"Raby had very peculiar notions on the subject of female education.

"Mine, for example, was carried on in rather a desultory

fashion. I was not fretted by restraint, or made stupid by long tasks; just sufficient knowledge was imparted to excite my reasoning powers and arouse the desire for more. 'Let her learn,' he would say, 'but let her learn as the bird learns to sing.' And when Margaret, in her gentle way, sighed over my lamentable ignorance of all feminine acquirements and household method:

"'Let her be,' he would reply, with masculine peremptoriness, 'we must not force nature. When the time comes for her womanly instincts to develop, not an English matron or even our own clever Margaret will excel Crystal then.' And still, more strange to say, he rather stimulated than repressed my vanity; and so I grew up quite conscious of my own personal attractions; but without the knowledge having undue weight with me.

"From the first he would have me dressed in the quaint rich style in which I came to them first.

"'It suits her peculiar style of beauty,' I heard him once say, when Margaret remonstrated with him on the extravagance of the idea. I was curled up on the window-seat, reading, and they did not think I was listening.

"'Raby is right,' observed Uncle Rolf; 'she will never make a quiet-looking English girl like our Maggie here—were you to dress her as a Puritan or a Quaker; ah, she will break hearts enough I'll warrant with those dark witch eyes of hers; we must be careful of the child! If Bianca's beauty were like her daughter's, one cannot wonder much at poor Edmund's choice.'

"Something in my uncle's speech aroused my childish petulance. I closed my book and came forward.

"'I don't want to break any hearts!' I cried, angrily; 'I only want Raby's—I am going to belong to Raby all my life, I will never leave him, never!' and I stamped my foot in a little fury.

"They all laughed, Uncle Rolf long and merrily, but Raby coloured up as he smiled.

"'That's right, darling,' he said, in a low voice. 'Now go back to your book.' And I went at once obediently.

"When I bade him good-night that evening, and stood lingering by his chair on some pretext or other, he suddenly took hold of me, and drew me towards him.

"'Little Crystal,' he said, 'you think you love Raby indeed; I am sure you do, and Heaven knows how sweet your childish affection is to me; but do you know—will you ever know how Raby loves you?' and putting his hands on my head he bade God bless my innocent face, and let me go.

"Oh, those delicious days of my childhood. But they are gone—they are gone! Long rambles on the sea-shore with Margaret, and in the corn-fields with Raby; now nutting in the copse or gathering briar roses in the lanes; setting out our strawberry feast under the great elm-tree on the lawn, or picking up fir-cones in the Redmond avenue. Spring flowers, and autumn sunsets—bright halcyon days of my youth made glorious with love.

"For as yet no shadow of the future had fallen upon me, no taint of that inherited passion had revealed itself; perhaps nothing had occurred to rouse the dormant temper lulled by the influences of this happy home. But the time came soon enough. Shall I ever forget that day?

"It was during the Easter vacation—I must have been nearly thirteen then. Raby had been unwell; some low feverish attack had seized him, and he was just ill enough to lie on the sofa all day and be petted and waited upon. I was perfectly happy from morning to night; I devoted myself to his amusement; reading to him, talking to him, or even sitting silently beside him while he slept.

"'Our Crystal is getting quite a woman,' he said once when I turned his hot pillow and put the cooling drink beside him; and at that brief word of praise my face flushed with pleasure, and I felt amply rewarded.

"One day we had visitors, Hugh Redmond, and two girls,

distant relations of his, who were staying at the Hall with their mother.

"One of them, Isabel Vyvie, I had seen several times, and had taken a great dislike to her.

"She was a tall striking-looking girl, much handsomer than her sister Emily, and she must have been two or three years older than Raby. She always seemed to like his society, so; while the others talked to Uncle Rolf and Margaret, she sat on my low chair beside Raby's couch, and talked to him without seeming to notice any one else.

"Miss Vyvie was very handsome and a flirt, and Raby was only a young man.

"It would hardly have been natural if he had not seemed gratified by her interest in him, though I did not know until afterwards that he valued it at its true cost.

"Still she was pleasant and her little airs amused him, and he entered into a long conversation with some enjoyment, and for once I was forgotten. I tried to join in once or twice, but Miss Vyvie treated me as a child, and scarcely deigned to notice me; but Raby did not seem to resent her indifference or want of courtesy.

"'He only cares for me when others are not by,' I thought, and my heart began to swell with jealous emotion. But just before she left something occurred that fanned the envious spark into a flame.

"Her white hand was resting on the little table that stood beside the couch. There was a diamond ring on one finger that flashed as she moved; presently she stretched it out to Raby with a bewitching smile.

"'Oh, what lovely lilies of the valley,' she exclaimed, pointing to the flowers; 'they are the first I have seen this year. I adore lilies, they are perfectly exquisite. Do let me have them, Mr. Ferrers. I know they grew in the garden, and I shall keep them as a memento of Sandycliffe and the dear Grange. Come, you must not let me break the tenth com-

mandment and covet any longer,' and the fair girlish hand rested near the flowers as she spoke.

"Raby looked embarrassed and hesitated.

"I had gathered those lilies for him before the dew was off them. They grew in a little nook of the Redmond grounds; they were his favourite flowers, and I had walked all those miles to hunt for them.

"'Come,' she said, 'surely you will not refuse me, Mr. Ferrers,' and her smile was very winning; and Raby, though reluctant, laid the little spray of lilies in her hand. He could hardly have done otherwise, but I was too young to know that.

"'There, she has gone at last, the pretty chatterbox,' he exclaimed, with a yawn of real or pretended weariness as the door closed upon our visitors. 'Crystal, my child, come here; I have not heard your voice for the last hour. Tell me what you think of Miss Vyvie; is she not a lively young lady?'

"I made him no answer. I was past it.

"Oh, if I had only gone silently out of the room to recover myself. If he had not spoken to me just then. He started when he saw my face.

"'Crystal, my dear child, what is the matter?' and then—then it burst forth. Oh, my God, I must have been beside myself. Surely some demon must have entered into my childish heart, before I could have poured forth that torrent of passionate invective and reproach.

"They had never witnessed such a scene. Margaret, sweet soul, cried and trembled as she heard me, and Uncle Rolf grew quite pale.

"'That child,' he cried, 'Edmund's child!' and his voice was full of horror; but Raby rose slowly from his couch, and without a word led me from the room.

"I do not know whether I yielded to that firm touch, or whether his strength compelled me; but still silent he took me up to my room and left me there.

"Oh, the awfulness of that mute reproach, the sternness of that pale face; it recalled me to myself sooner than any word would have done. Almost before the door closed my passion had spent itself, and then the agony of shame and despair that followed! I had forfeited his good opinion for ever. He would never love me again! If I could die—oh, impious prayer that I prayed—if I could only die! But I would never see his face again. I would go where they could never find me, where I would never grieve them more.

"Fern, it was a strange feature that marked those passionate fits of mine; but I never yielded to them afterwards without the same desire seizing me to go away and see them no more; and but for the watchful care that surrounded me at those times I should often have escaped.

"It came upon me now, this horror of restraint, and overmastered me. To my fancy I seemed to feel the walls falling in upon me in judgment for my sin. I was suffocated, and yet restless. Oh to be away, I thought, to be away from those reproachful faces; and I rushed down stairs, through the house, and down the yew-tree walk; but the garden door into the lane was locked, and at that slight obstacle I shivered and lay down on the grass and crushed my face against the ground, and felt like some youthful Cain, branded with unextinguishable shame.

"I had lost Raby's love. I had forfeited his respect. There lay the unbearable sting. Never should I forget that pale stern face, and the unspoken reproach in those dark eyes.

"'Oh, I cannot bear it,' I cried; 'I cannot, cannot, bear it.'

"'My child,' said Raby's grave voice close to me, 'if you are sorry, and your grief tells me you are, you must ask pardon of our Father in heaven.'

"'Then—may a merciful God forgive me for my blasphemy,'—I cried, 'not His, but yours, Raby. I cannot live without your love;' and then I was almost choked with my sobs.

"'Crystal,' he said, with a heavy sigh, 'can this be my child whom I have taught and guided, my child for whom I have prayed every night;' and touched by the gentleness of his tone I crept a little nearer and clasped his feet.

"'I can never be forgiven,' I sobbed. 'What has heaven to do with such a sinner as I?'

"'Ah, little one,' he answered, 'have not I forgiven thee, and I was stretched on no cross for thy sake;' and then, kneeling down by my side, he raised my wet face from the grass, and laid it gently on his arm and kissed it, and then I knew I was forgiven.

"Never, never shall I forget how he talked to me—and yet he was ill—as a brother and a priest too! How he helped me to bear the terror of the sin and the shame of my repentance; how, without removing one iota of its guilt or one dread of its probable consequences, he led me to the one consolation. 'Thy sins, even thine, shall be forgiven thee,' and then he took me back into the house, cast down indeed and humbled, but no longer despairing, and led me to Uncle Rolf.

"'Father,' he said, still holding my hand, perhaps because he felt how I trembled, 'father, Crystal has come to ask your pardon and Margaret's also for the pain she has caused you both, and to say that, with God's help, she will never offend so again.'

"Never! oh Raby, never! when the inborn enemy was strong as death and cruel as the grave. Oh, my good angel Raby, what have the years written against me—against me—your unhappy child?"

CHAPTER XXIV

A GRAVE DECISION

"From the day
I brought to England my poor searching face
(An orphan even of my father's grave);
He had loved me, watched me, watched his soul in mine,
Which in me grew, and heighten'd into love."

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

"THE years rolled by, but, alas! they brought no added happiness with them. The taint in my nature that had revealed itself so unexpectedly, only developed more strongly as time went on; at rare intervals—very rare I am thankful to say—fierce gusts of passion over-mastered my reason, so that for a brief time I seemed like one possessed with an evil spirit.

"They tried everything—everything that human wisdom and kindness could devise to save me from myself, but in vain. All causes for offence were removed, and every possible means taken to ward off the threatened excitement; but when the paroxysms came, they wasted no words, no severity upon me, they simply left me to myself.

"But the punishment that followed was a terrible one. For days and days after one of these outbreaks, sometimes for a week together, Raby would refuse to speak to me or to hold any communication at all.

"Our walks and rides, our pleasant studies, were all broken off, every little office and attention refused, my remarks met by a chilling manner that drove me to silence.

"Left completely to my own society, I wandered aimlessly about the house, or sat moping over my books or work in a corner. I never sought to rebel against the rigour of my sentence; it was a just one I knew, and I bore it as patiently as I could. And then all at once, sometimes when I least expected it, when I was most hopeless and forlorn, a hand would be placed on my head in the old caressing manner, and a low 'forgiven, darling,' would bring me back to sunshine and happiness; but, oh, how he suffered. I never knew until afterwards that his punishment was even greater than mine.

"I am speaking now of my younger days, but presently there came a time when they treated it less as a fault than a malady; when Raby dreaded the repentance more than the paroxysm, for so poignant was my anguish of remorse that it threatened to prey on my health.

"Then, when they saw how I wept and strove against it, and how the torment of my own undisciplined nature was more than I could bear, then they grew to look upon me as one upon whom some deadly scourge was laid—some moral sickness that they could not understand indeed, but which, out of their great love, they could afford to pity.

"Years rolled on. Raby had passed through his university life with honours; had gained a fellowship, and had taken orders, and accepted a curacy some distance from Sandycliffe.

"It was only a temporary position, until the church at Sandycliffe had been restored and was ready for use; the living had been already promised to him, and small as it was, he wished to hold it, at least for the present. Raby was a man singularly devoid of ambition, and though he must have been conscious that his were no common gifts, he always told us that he did not wish a wider sphere until he had tested his powers, and had worked a little in the home vineyard.

"At this time he was much occupied with his studies, and some doctrinal treatise on which he was engaged; and as only

Sunday duty was required of him, he was able to be with us from Monday to Saturday, a great boon to us, as Uncle Rolf's health was failing, and his son's constant presence was a great comfort to him. He died when I was about fifteen, and then Raby became master of the Grange.

"The next two years that followed were, in spite of my dear uncle's loss, very happy ones.

"The fits of passion became more rare and decreased in violence, and for a time ceased altogether. It seemed to be coming true what Raby had once prophesied, that I should outgrow them when I became a woman.

"That was our chief joy; but later on, after a year or so, Hugh Redmond came more frequently to the Grange, and by and by Margaret and he were engaged. Raby gave his consent rather reluctantly, he always told me he did not consider him worthy of a woman like Margaret, he thought him weak and impulsive and without ballast; but Margaret had lost her heart to her handsome young lover, and could see no fault in him, and for a time all went smoothly; but I am anticipating a little.

"The event that stands prominently in my recollection was a ball that was to be given in honour of young Egerton Trelawney, the eldest son of a wealthy merchant living at Pierrepoint. Margaret was going, and of course Hugh Redmond would be there, but they were not engaged then. Margaret had induced Raby to let me accompany her, for I was nearly seventeen then, and very womanly for my age. He consented rather reluctantly, I thought, and the subject dropped. Another time I should have tried to extort a more gracious permission, for my heart was set on the ball; but for some time I had noticed a slight change in Raby's manner to me, an imperceptible reserve that made me a little less at my case with him; it was not that he failed in kindness, for he had never been so good to me, but there was certainly a slight barrier between us. He ceased to treat me as a child, there was something

deferential in his tenderness; his eyes had a keen watchful look in them as they rested on me that perplexed me.

"I was beginning not to understand Raby at all; either he was not quite happy, or I had disappointed him in some way; and yet, though I longed to question him, an unusual shyness held me back.

"It was the evening before the ball, and Raby was in the library so absorbed in his Hebrew manuscript, that for once he had not missed me from my accustomed place.

"The new ball dress Margaret had ordered for me in London had just arrived, and she had coaxed me to put down my book and try it on in case any alterations should be required. I had never seen any gown I liked better; the rich creamy tint just set off my olive complexion and coils of black hair to perfection. I was quite startled when I saw myself in the long pier glass; my neck and arms were gleaming through the dainty cobwebby lace, a ruby pendant sparkled like a crimson star at my throat. Margaret was enchanted.

"'Oh, Crystal,' she exclaimed, 'how beautiful you look, just like an Esther or Vashti with their grand oriental faces. Come down with me and let us startle Raby from his dusty old folios; he will think he sees a vision.'

"I followed her smiling; I was pleased that Raby should see me in this queenly garb. I stole gently behind his chair. 'Oh, king, live for ever,' I said, laughing, and then he turned round; and as I dropped him a mocking curtsey, he tried to suppress the exclamation that rose to his lips.

"'Shall I do?' I continued, mischievously; 'shall I do, Raby?' and I made a sweeping obeisance to him such as Esther might have made to Ahasuerus, but no like sceptre of favour was extended to me.

"'Yes, you will do very nicely,' he said, curtly, and then he went back to his folios. But I had seen the expression in his eyes, the long wistful look he had cast at me, and I triumphed.

"But my triumph was of brief duration. The next morning Raby treated me with almost chilling reserve. In vain I laughed, and talked, and strove to win him to merriment; his manner repelled all such attempts, and I was obliged to chat with Margaret.

"'Where are you going?' I asked, presently, when he had closed his books and was preparing to leave the room.

"'I am going up to West Point to see poor Lettie White,' he returned; 'her mother has been down this morning and tells me she is worse. You had better not accompany me, Crystal,' for I had started up from my chair.

"'And why not?' I exclaimed, in a hurt voice; 'it is such a delicious morning, and there is no such place as the West Point for a breeze; it will freshen me up for the evening.'

"'Well, do as you like,' he returned, coldly, and closed the door. The indifference of his tone wounded me. What could I have done to offend him; but I was never proud where Raby was concerned, so I put on my hat and accompanied him.

"For the first mile or two we were very silent. Raby walked on with his shoulders slightly bent, and his eyes fixed on the ground, a habit of his when he was thinking very deeply.

"'Raby,' I said at last, rather timidly, 'I wish you would walk a little slower, I want to talk to you;' and then he looked at me with some surprise.

"'I was only thinking of my next Sunday's sermon,' he replied, as if in apology for his want of attention. 'I told you you had better not come with me, Crystal.'

"'Oh, I know you did not want me,' I answered, lightly; 'your manner made that fact very apparent; but you see I wanted to come, and so I had my own way. Of course I know the text you will choose, Raby. What a pity that it is too far for me to come and hear that sermon. To think that neither Margaret nor I have ever heard you preach, and to lose that sermon of all others.'

"'What do you mean?' he answered, rather irritably, for my gay mood was clashing with his sombre one.

"'Oh, the text will be, "Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher. All is vanity"; that will be your subject, Raby, will it not?'

"He turned round at that, and a smile dispelled his gravity; and then he took my hand and put it on his arm, and held it gently there.

"'I think you have guessed my thoughts, Crystal,' he said, quietly, 'but not all of them. Do you know I have been thinking as we came along that you and I, dear child, have reached the cross roads of life at last, where each must choose his or her path, and go on their way alone.'

"'Oh, Raby,' I exclaimed in some distress as I pressed closer to him; 'what can you mean by saying anything so dreadful. I hope your path and mine will always be the same.'

"'My dear,' he returned, gently—very gently; but there was pain and some strange solemn meaning in his face—'I disappointed you last night. You thought that I would not praise your finery or stoop to flatter your innocent vanity, that I held myself aloof from your girlish pleasure. Ah,' with a sudden change of tone, 'you little know what brilliant vision haunted me last night and drove sleep from my eyes; how it lured and tempted me from my sense of right; but God had mercy on His poor priest, and strengthened his hands in the day of battle.'

"The white abstracted look of his face, the low vehemence of his tone, thrilled me almost painfully; never had Raby looked or spoken like that.

"'No, my darling,' he went on, sorrowfully, 'I will never wrong the child I have guided and protected all these years, or take advantage of your youth and inexperience, by using my influence and condemning you to a life for which you are not fitted. Go forth into the world then, my Esther—did not

Margaret compare you to Esther—make experience of its pleasures, its trials, its seductions, its false wooings, and its dazzling honours; if they tell you your beauty might win a coronet they would be right.'

"'Raby!'

"'Hush! let me finish; go into the world that claims you, but if it fail to please you—if it ever cast you away humbled and broken-hearted, then come back to me, my darling, come back to Raby; he will be praying for you here.'

"Shall I ever forget his tone; my tears fell fast as I listened to him.

"'What do you mean?' I sobbed; 'how have I offended you? Why do you propose to send me away from you?'

"'Nay,' he said, quietly, 'I am only speaking for your good. You are young, Crystal, but you must be conscious, indeed your manner told me so last night that you have grace, beauty, and talents, triple gifts that the world adores. You will be its idol. Make your own election, then, my child, for you are now a woman. I will never seek to influence you, I am only a humble priest. What has such a one to do with a ball-room queen; the world's ways have never been my ways, for from my youth I have determined that "for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."'

"His calm stedfast voice awed me; every word seemed to rebuke my vanity and presumption. Ah, I saw it all now. Raby was disappointed with my choice; he had hoped—he had hoped otherwise.

"We had reached the end of our walk by this time. Before us was the poor cottage where Lettie White was dying. I took my hand from Raby's arm and sat down on the little stone bench by the beehives. Raby seemed to linger a moment, as though he expected me to speak to him, but I remained silent, and he turned away with a quick sigh and went into the house. Soon after I heard his voice through the

upper window, where the white curtains were flapping in the breeze, and Lettie's weak tones answering him.

"Before me was a field of crimson clover; some brown bees were busily at work in it. There were scarlet poppies too gleaming in the hedge down below; the waves were lapping on the sands with a soft splash and ripple; beyond was the sea vast and crystalline, merged in misty blue. Did I hear it with a dull whirring of repetition, or was it the voice of my own conscience: 'For me and my house, we will serve the Lord.'

"Raby came out presently, and we walked home, still silent. The dignity of his office was upon him; his lips were moving, perhaps in petition for the dying girl.

"When we reached the house he went up to his room. The evening came. I got out our German books—Raby and I were studying together—and presently he joined me. In his absence of mind he had forgotten all about the ball, as I knew he would, and we were both absorbed in Schiller's magnificent *Wallenstein* when Margaret entered, looking what Hugh Redmond called, his 'Marguerite of Marguerites,' his pearl among women.

"Raby started and looked perplexed.

"'What, is it so late? You are dressed, Margaret, and this careless child has not commenced her toilet. Pray help her, Maggie, she will be dreadfully late.'

"Margaret gave me a wistful smile.

"'The carriage is here already,' she answered, quietly, 'and Mrs. Montague is waiting. Crystal is not going to the ball, Raby.'

"'Not going?' He turned and looked at me, our eyes met, and then he understood.

"'Does not Margaret look lovely,' I asked in assumed carelessness, when the hall door had closed, and he came back to the room.

"For answer he took me in his arms.

"'Not half so fair as my Esther,' he said tenderly, 'though she is not wearing her regal dress. I thank God,' and here his voice grew low and solemn. 'I thank God, Crystal, that my darling has chosen the better part that shall not be taken away from her.'

CHAPTER XXV

GO BACK TO RABY

"O calm grand eyes, extinguished in a storm,
Blown out like lights o'er melancholy seas,
Though shriek'd for by the shipwrecked.
O my dark!
My Cloud,—to go before me every day,
While I go ever toward the wilderness,
I would that you could see me bare to the soul."

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

"THINGS went on very happily for a long time after this. The church at Sandycliffe was finished; Raby gave up his curacy, and read himself in; and then came the day when Margaret and I heard him preach.

"Shall I ever forget that day—it was Eastertide—and all that belonged to it? the last unclouded Sunday that was ever to rise upon me; the tiny flower-decked church already crowded with worshippers, the memorial window that Raby and Margaret had put in, sacred to the memory of their father, with its glorious colours reflected on the pavement in stains of ruby and violet; and lastly, the grave beautiful face of the young vicar as he looked round upon his little flock for the first time, his eyes resting for a moment as though in silent benediction on the Vicarage seat.

"Were I to tell you what I thought of that sermon, you might think my praise partial, but there were many there, Hugh Redmond among them, who commented afterwards on the eloquence and vivid power of the preacher. Hugh Redmond

had accompanied us to church, for he and Margaret had been engaged some months, and they were always together. He declared that that sermon had made a deep impression on him.

"Many were affected that day by Raby's deep searching eloquence, but none more so than a lady who sat alone under the pulpit, and who drew down her crape veil that no one might see her tears.

"I knew her well; she was a childless widow who had lately come to live at Sandycliffe in a pretty cottage about half a mile from the Grange, and with whom Margaret had become very intimate,—a fair gentle-looking woman who had gone through much trouble, and who wished to devote her life to good works; and as I looked at her now, my own eyes misty with sympathy, did I ever imagine that the time was fast approaching when I should wrong her with the bitterest hatred, and even seek to lift my hand against her.

"And yet you were one of God's dear saints, Mona!

"The service over, we lingered for a moment in the shady churchyard, Hugh and Margaret and I, until Raby should join us. He came out at last, a little pale and tired-looking. Margaret met him, her eyes shining like stars.

"'Oh, Raby,' she faltered, 'God has given me my heart's desire.' He smiled, but his hand went out to the girl standing silently behind him.

"'What does my child say?' he whispered, when the others had gone on a little; but I had no answer ready, he was so good, so far above me. With a sudden impulse I lifted the kind hand to my lips as though he were a king.

* * * * *

"Raby was very zealous in his profession. There was little to do in Sandycliffe, but he offered himself as coadjutor to the vicar of Pierrepoint, and as there was a large poor population there, he and Margaret, and Mrs. Grey, his faithful helper, found plenty of scope for their energies.

"Mrs. Grey had no ties, she was rich and lonely, and she sought relief from her sick heart in ministering to the needs of others. Her health was delicate, and the air of Sandycliffe suited her—she had taken a fancy to the place; and the pretty cottage she rented was more to her taste than her house at South Kensington.

"Margaret and she were always together, their natures were congenial to each other, and a warm friendship grew up between them; Raby was also much interested in the young widow. I heard him say more than once that she was a rare creature, and so humble in her own estimation that one would never have guessed how cultivated and accomplished she really was; 'her manners are so perfectly gentle,' he went on, 'no wonder Margaret is glad to have found such a friend.'

"I began to think she was Raby's friend too, for nothing seemed to be done in Sandycliffe without Mrs. Grey—'our Mrs. Grey,' as Raby called her. Scarcely a day passed without seeing her at the Grange, and very often, as I knew, Raby called at the cottage.

"When I was with him their conversation was always about Pierrepoint, about the workmens' club Raby had started, and the mothers' meeting that was Mrs. Grey's hobby; she was certainly, in spite of her weak health, a most active creature; Raby always seemed to defer to her opinion. He told Margaret that Mrs. Grey was one of the most clear-headed women he had ever met, that her large-minded views were always surprising him. I used to listen in silence to all this. I liked Mrs. Grey, but I began to be jealous of her influence; I thought Raby was too much guided by her judgment—perhaps he was fascinated by her sweet looks.

"'Small beginnings make large endings.' 'Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth.' Even in a small country place like Sandycliffe there are busy and mischievous tongues. Presently a whisper reached my ears that fanned the smouldering embers of discontent within me to a scorching flame.

"Raby was a young unmarried man, and Mrs. Grey was young and attractive. What if people declared that her heart was buried in her husband's grave, and that she would never marry again; they knew young widows always said those sort of things. Perhaps the vicar would induce her to change her mind some day. It would be such an excellent match, they went on; they were evidently cut out for each other, both so good; and then she was rich, it would be such a fortunate thing for Mr. Ferrers, especially when his sister left him; and then, looking at me, they supposed I should go to Redmond Hall with my cousin when she married. People talked like this to us both. Margaret used to laugh as though she were amused at the notion, and she seemed to expect me to laugh too; then she got a little indignant, and contradicted the report gravely. Nothing of the kind could ever happen, she said—she wished those busybodies would leave Raby and Mona alone; Mona was her friend, not his. But somehow I did not believe her. Fern, you look at me reproachfully, you think I ought to have been wiser; but how could I know; I was Raby's adopted child, his pet, but Mrs. Grey was more his equal in age, and she was very pretty. Her fair delicate style of beauty, and her extreme softness and gentleness might be dangerously attractive to a man like Raby, and I feared—I distrusted her.

"Alas! in a little time I learnt to look upon her as my deadliest rival; to hear her name on his lips would send a jealous thrill through me.

"They were always together, at least it seemed so to me; but perhaps I was wrong. By and by I dropped all pretence of parish work; it did not suit me, I said. Raby seemed grieved, but he was true to his word, and did not try to influence me. Perhaps he thought I was restless and was pining for excitement and gaiety. Alas! he little knew I would wander miles away, that I might not encounter them coming up the village street together, or witness the frank, cordial smile with which they parted. Mona's look, her touch, her soft vibrating voice

set every nerve on edge. I was pining with a disease for which I knew no name and no remedy, and which was preying on my health and spirits.

"And worst of all, I was completely misunderstood. When in the unequal struggle my appetite failed and sleep forsook me, and a sort of fever kept me restless and irritable, and still no physical illness was at the root, they misconstrued the symptoms and attributed my depression to another cause. I saw in their looks that they distrusted me; they thought my old enemy was coming back, and redoubled their gentleness and care. Then Raby would speak tenderly to me, till every word sounded like a caress; and Margaret would follow me from place to place like some guardian spirit, as though she did not wish to lose sight of me. But they never guessed the cause—how could they? for as the weeks went on, a cold forbidding haughtiness hid their child's suffering heart from them. I would die, I said to myself recklessly, before they should guess my secret.

"Raby's face grew sad and then somewhat stern. I knew the old doubts were harassing him; he feared their quiet life was irksome to my youth, that I was fretting in secret for the gaieties and triumphs I had renounced.

"One day we three were sitting at luncheon together; I was playing with the food on my plate to prevent them noticing my want of appetite, as though I could ever evade Raby's eyes, and longing to escape from the room, for I felt more than usually miserable.

"Raby was watching me, I could see, though his conversation was directed to Margaret. She had been talking about the new schools that Mrs. Grey proposed building at Pierrepoint.

"'She wants to sell her house at South Kensington,' she said; 'she never means to live there again. It is a great pity, I tell her, for it is such a comfortable house and so beautifully furnished. But she will have it that she feels happier in her cottage; how good she is, Raby.'

"'Yes, indeed, hers is almost a perfect character,' he replied; 'she is so strong and yet so womanly, so very, very gentle.'

"Something in Raby's words touched too sensitive a chord, and after a vain attempt to control myself, I suddenly burst into hysterical tears, and left the room. They thought it was my strange temper, but I was only miserable that the enemy —my Philistine—was upon me, when he was only lurking in ambush for the time when my weakness would render me an easy prey.

"Let me go on quickly, for the remembrance of that day overpowers me. They never came near me. Raby always treated me himself at such times, and sometimes he would not allow Margaret to come to me; it was so now, and yet her dear face and sympathy might have saved me. I sobbed myself quiet, and then I lay on the couch in the morning-room, feeling strangely ill. I was faint and sick. I had eaten nothing, and I wanted food and wine, and to be hushed and comforted like a little child; and no one came near me. Of course not! they thought it was a fit of the old passion. No doubt Raby was in the village talking it over with Mona.

"It grew towards evening—cool quiet evening, but there was no quiet in my heart. I was burning with inward fever.

"I had had little sleep the night before, something odd and tumultuous seemed rising in my brain; a gleam of fair hair was blinding me. He loves fair women, I thought, and he calls me his dark-eyed Esther. Oh, Raby, I hate her! I hate her! You shall never marry her! You shall never call her your darling! I felt as though I should kill her first; for, indeed, I was nearly wild with passion, they had left me too long alone.

"Presently the door opened, and Raby came in. He looked very grave, I thought, as he sat down beside me. His quiet glance recalled me to myself.

"'Crystal,' he said, gently, 'have you been ill again, my

dear?' They always called the paroxysms 'illness' now, but the word displeased me.

"'Where is Margaret?' I asked, sullenly. 'I cannot talk to you, Raby. I am weak, and you do not understand. If I am ill, as you say, you should not keep Margaret from me.'

"'She is at the schools,' he returned, soothingly, 'I left her with Mrs. Grey—they will be here directly; but, Crystal, my darling, before they come in I want to have a little talk with you. You are better now, are you not? I want to tell you what I have decided to do for my child's welfare. I am going to send her away!'

"I sprang up with an exclamation of dismay, but he put me back firmly and quietly on the couch as though I were a child, and went on with his speech.

"'Crystal,' he said, rather sternly, 'I claim obedience as your guardian; I claim it legally and morally.' Never had he spoken so severely before. 'I am doing what costs me a great sacrifice. I am going to send you away from us for a little while for your own good; for your own peace and happiness. Alas! I see plainly now, how we have failed to secure either.' I tried to speak, but I could not. I crushed my hands together as though they were in a vice, as I listened.

"'Heaven knows,' he continued, sadly, 'how I have tried to do my duty to you, and how Margaret has tried too; how we have loved you, prayed and cared for you, never thinking of ourselves, but only of you. What have we done that you should hide your unhappiness from us? Why did you not come to me and tell me frankly, and like a brave girl, that the sacrifice I asked was too great for you to yield; that your youth and temperament demanded a different life to mine; that the quiet and monotony were killing you; would anything have been too hard for your brother's love?'

"I shivered at the word. Oh, Raby, why—why did you utter it? who never were, who never could be a brother of mine. He

had never used that word before; it bore a terrible meaning to me now.

"'I have spoken to Dr. Connor,' he went on, more quickly, 'and his opinion coincides with mine; and so I have arranged it all with Mrs. Grey; surely a kinder and sweeter soul never breathed, not even our own Margaret. You are to go abroad under her care for six months; Dr. Connor advises it. Yes, it will be hard for us, but never fear, my darling, the time will soon pass.'

"'You shall go to Switzerland and Italy, and see your father's grave, and your beautiful Florence again. You shall see fresh sights and breathe fresh air until this weary lassitude has left you, and you come back to us like our old Crystal.'

"'I will not go, Raby,' I exclaimed, exasperated beyond endurance at the very idea. 'I will never go with Mrs. Grey;' but I might as well have spoken to a rock.

"'I am your guardian, and I tell you that you will go, Crystal,' he returned, severely, but his sternness was only assumed to hide his pain. 'Nay, my child,' as he saw my face, 'do not make it too hard for me, by a resistance that will be useless. Think how the months will fly by, and how the change will benefit you, and how good it is of our dear Mrs. Grey to give up her peaceful home and her work just for your sake and mine.'

"His sake! He was driving me mad. Ah, it was on me now. He might talk or he might be silent, but this would make itself heard.

* * * * *

"Oh Mona, lying deep in your quiet grave, where they carried you so soon, it was not I, but the demon who possessed me!

* * * * *

"He was very white now. He took hold of my hands and held them firmly.

"'How dare you, Crystal,' he said, sternly; 'how dare you

speak of a lady, of Mrs. Grey in that way. Ah, Heavenly Father forgive this unhappy child, she cannot know what she says.'

"I answered with a mocking laugh that seemed forced from my lips, and then, as though my unhappy fate were sealed, Mrs. Grey entered.

"She thought that it was an hysterical attack, and came at once to Raby's help.

"'Do not be alarmed, Mr. Ferrers,' she said, gently, 'it is only hysteria;' and she held out a glass of cold water to him. The action provoked me. I tore myself from Raby's grasp, dashing the glass aside. I longed to break something. There was a bottle beside me, some chemical acid that Hugh Redmond had carelessly left that very morning. I snatched up the vial, for I wanted to crush it into a million atoms, and rush from the room; but she called out in affright, 'Oh, Crystal, don't touch it, it is——' and then she never finished.

"I saw her white hands trembling, her blue eyes dilated with horror; and then my demon was upon me. I knew what it was, and I hurled it at her, and Raby sprang between—he sprang between us, Oh, Raby, Raby!—and then, with a shriek that rang through my brain for months afterwards, he fell to the ground in convulsions of agony.

* * * * *

"I cannot go on. I cannot!

"Was not Cain's punishment greater than he could bear?

"When they came to me as I lay in my despair across the threshold of his door, and told me that the light of those beautiful eyes was quenched for ever; that I should never meet that loving glance again, that he was blind,—blind—and that it was my hand that had done it; then it was that in my agony I breathed the vow that I would remove their curse from them, that I would wander forth, Cain-like, into the great world, until my punishment was in some degree commensurate with my sin. Fern, I have never faltered in my purpose. I

have never repented of my resolve, though their love has sought to recall me, and I know that in their hearts they have forgiven me. I have worked, and wept, and prayed, and my expiation has not been in vain.

"In the Crystal, you know, you will hardly find a trace of the high-spirited girl that Raby loved, nay, that he loves still. Ah, I know it all now; how he seeks for his darling, and makes it his life purpose to find her, and bring her back to peace. I know how even in his intolerable anguish he prayed them to have mercy upon me, and to spare me the awful truth. I have seen his face, that changed blind face of his. I have ministered to him with these hands, I have heard his dear voice, and yet I have not betrayed myself."

"Crystal," sobbed Fern, and indeed she could scarcely speak for her tears, she was so moved by this pitiful story, "if I were you I would go back to-morrow; how can you, how can you leave him, when he needs you so?"

"I go back to him?" repeated the other girl, mournfully. "I who have blighted his life and darkened his days; who have made his existence a long night? I who have robbed him of the glory of his priesthood, and made him what he is, a wreck of his former self?"

"Yes," was the steady answer. "I would go back to him and be his eyes, though his goodness humbled me in the dust. Ah, Crystal, are you worse than she out of whom the Saviour cast seven devils, and who loved much because much had been forgiven her?"

"Hush, hush! you do not know, Fern!"

"My darling, I do know," persisted Fern, gently, "and I tell you that it is your duty to go back to Raby, who loves you so. Nay," she continued, as a deep blush rose to Crystal's olive cheek, "he never cared for this Mona,—your own words have proved that. Go back to him, and be the light of his eyes, and take his darkness from him, for I see plainly that he will never leave off seeking you, and you only."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE TALL YOUNG LADY IN BROWN

"Not enjoyment and not sorrow
Is our destined end or way;
But to act that each to-morrow
Finds us further than to-day.

. . . .

"In the world's broad field of battle
In the bivouac of life
Be not like dumb driven cattle,
Be a hero in the strife."

LONGFELLOW.

As Fern finished her little speech, Crystal hid her face in her hands, but there was no answer—only the sound of a deep drawn sob was distinctly audible. A few minutes afterwards she raised it, and in the moonlight Fern could see it was streaming with tears.

"Do not say any more," she implored; "do you think my own heart does not tell me all that, but I will not go back yet; the flaming sword of conscience still bars my way to my Paradise. Fern, do you know why I have told you my story? it is because I am going away, and I want you to promise me something, and there is no one else I can ask; no, not your mother," as Fern looked surprised at this, "she has enough to trouble her."

"What is it?" asked Fern, rather timidly.

"I am going away," returned Crystal, "and one never knows what may happen. I am young, but life is uncertain. If I never come back, if anything befalls me, will you with

your own hands give this to Raby," and as she spoke, she drew from her bosom a thick white envelope sealed and directed, and placed it in Fern's lap. As it lay there Fern could read the inscription: "To be given to the Rev. Raby Ferrers, after my death."

"Oh, Crystal," she exclaimed, with a shiver, "what could happen to you. You are young—not one-and-twenty yet—and your health is good, and——" but Crystal interrupted her with a strange smile.

"Yes, it is true; but the young and the strong have to die sometimes; when the call comes we must go. Do not look so frightened, Fern, I will not die if I can help it; but if it should be so, will you with your own hands give that to Raby; it will tell him what I have suffered, and—and it will comfort him a little."

"Yes, dear, I will do it;" and Fern leaned forwards and kissed her softly. The moon was shining brightly now, and in the clear white light Fern noticed for the first time how thin and pale Crystal looked; how her cheek, and even her slight supple figure, had lost their roundness. There were deep hollows in the temples, dark lines under the dark eyes; in spite of her beauty she was fearfully wan. The grief that preyed upon her would soon ravage her good looks. For the first time Fern felt a vague fear oppressing her, but she had no opportunity to say more, for at that moment Crystal rose quickly from her seat.

"You have promised," she said, gratefully; "thank you for that. It is a great trust, Fern, but I know I can rely on you. Now I can talk no more. If your mother comes in, will you tell her about Miss Campion. I think she will be glad for many reasons. Now I will try and sleep, for there is much to be done to-morrow. Good-night, my dear;" and the next moment Fern found herself alone in the moonlight.

When Mrs. Trafford returned, she heard the news very quietly.

"It will be better—much better," she said, quickly. "You must not fret about it, my sunbeam. Crystal is beginning to look ill; change and movement will do her good. Our life is very quiet. She has too much time to feed upon herself. She will be obliged to rouse herself among strangers." And when Fern told her tearfully of the promise she had made, Mrs. Trafford only listened with a grave smile.

"Put it away safely, my dear; you will never have to give it, I hope; only it is a relief to the poor child to know you have it. Her's is a strange morbid nature. She is not yet humbled sufficiently. When she is, she will go back, like the Prodigal, and take the forgiveness that is waiting for her. Now, my darling, all this sad talk has made you look pale. You must try and forget it, and go to sleep." But, for the first time in her healthy girlhood, sleep refused to come at Fern's bidding; and she lay restless and anxious, thinking of her friend's tragical story until the grey dawn ushered in the new day.

The little household in Beulah Place were very busy during the next few days. The girls went out shopping together to replenish Crystal's modest wardrobe, and then sat working until nearly midnight to complete the new travelling dress. Fern was putting the final stitches on the last afternoon while Crystal went to bid good-bye to her pupils. The black trunk in the girl's room was already packed, for she was to start early in the morning.

Percy had not yet heard the news; he had been away from town the last week, to Crystal's great relief. She had begged Mrs. Trafford and Fern to say nothing about her movements. He might appear at any moment, and Crystal dreaded a scene if he heard of her approaching departure.

"It will be much better for him not to know until the sea is between us," she had said to Mrs. Trafford. "When he hears I have gone without bidding him good-bye, he will see then that I mean what I say—that my life has nothing to do with his;" and Mrs. Trafford had agreed to this.

It was with a feeling of annoyance and very real discomfort, then, that Crystal caught sight of him as she came down the steps of Upton House. He was walking quickly down the street, and evidently perceived her at once. There would be no chance of escaping him, so she walked slowly on, quite aware that he would overtake her in another minute. As they were to part so soon, she must put up with his escort. Of course he had been to Beulah Place, and was now in search of her; poor foolish boy!

The next moment she heard his footstep behind her.

"Miss Davenport, this is too delightful," and his handsome face wore a look of pleased eagerness. "I thought I should have to wait some time, from Fern's account, but I have not been here a moment. There is no hurry, is there?" checking her pace as Crystal seemed inclined to walk fast.

"We are busy people, Mr. Trafford," she answered, pleasantly, "and can never afford to walk slowly. Why did you not wait with your sister? you have not seen her for a long time."

"Has it seemed a long time to you?" he returned, with quick emphasis. "I wish I could believe that you had missed me, that you had even given me a thought during my absence;" and he looked wistfully at the girl as he spoke.

"I am sure your mother and Fern missed you," she replied, evasively. She wanted to keep him in good humour, and avoid any dangerous topics. She would like to leave him, if possible, with some kindly memory of this interview. In spite of his sins against her, she could not altogether harden her heart against Fern's brother.

Any stranger meeting these two young people would have regarded them as a perfectly matched couple. Percy's refined aristocratic face and distinguished carriage made a splendid foil for Crystal's dark beauty and girlish grace. As Percy's eyes rested on her they scarcely noticed the shabby dress she wore. He was thinking as usual that he had never seen any

one to compare with this young governess; and he wondered, as he had wondered a hundred times before, if her mother had been an Englishwoman; his mother would never tell him anything about Miss Davenport, except that she was of good birth and an orphan.

"Did you bring Mr. Huntingdon with you?" she asked rather hurriedly, for she was quite aware of the fixed look that always annoyed her. The admiration of men was odious to her now the only eyes she had cared to please would never look at her again.

"Do you mean Erle?" was the careless answer. "Oh no, my dearly beloved cousin has other game to bring down;" and here there was a slightly mocking tone in Percy's voice. "He is with *la belle* Evelyn as usual. I am afraid Erle does not quite hit it as an ardent lover; he is rather half-hearted. He asked me to go down to Victoria Station to meet his visitor, but I declined, with thanks. I had other business on hand, and I do not care to be ordered about; so the carriage must go alone."

"You are expecting visitors at Belgrave House then?" she asked; but there was no interest in her manner. She only wanted to keep the conversation to general subjects. She would talk of Belgrave House or of anything he liked if he would only not make love to her. If he only knew how she hated it, and from him of all men.

"Oh, it is not my visitor," was the reply; "it is only some old fogie or other that Erle has picked up at Sandycliffe—Erle has a craze about picking up odd people. Fancy inflicting a blind parson on us, by way of a change."

He was not looking at the girl as he spoke, or he must have seen the startled look on her face. The next moment she had turned her long neck aside.

"Do you mean he is actually blind, and a clergyman? how very strange!"

"Yes; the result of some accident or other. His name is

Ferrers. Erle raved about him to my grandfather; but then Erle always raves about people—he is terribly soft-hearted. He is coming up to London, on some quest or other, no one knows what it is, Erle is so very mysterious about the whole thing."

"Oh, indeed," rather faintly; "and you—you are to meet him, Mr. Trafford."

"On the contrary, I am going to do nothing of the kind," he returned, imperturbably. "I told Erle that at 6.30, the time the train was due, I was booked for a pressing engagement. I did not mention the engagement was with my mother, and that I should probably be partaking of a cup of tea; but the fact is true nevertheless."

Crystal did not answer; perhaps she could not. He was coming up to London, actually to Belgrave House, and on this very evening. Erle must have got scent of her secret—how or in what manner she could not guess; but all the same, it must be Erle who had betrayed her. She had thought him a little odd and constrained the last few times she had seen him; she had noticed more than once that his eyes had been fixed thoughtfully on her face as though he had been watching her, and he had seemed somewhat confused when he had found himself detected. What did it all mean; but never mind that now. Raby would be coming to Beulah Place, but she would be hundreds of miles away before that; she was safe, quite safe; but if only she could see him before she went. If she could only get rid of this tiresome Percy, who would stay, perhaps, for hours. Could she give him the slip. She could never remain in his company through a long evening; it would drive her frantic to listen to him, and to know all the time that Raby was near, and she could not see him. And then all at once a wild idea came to her, and her pale cheeks flushed, and her eyes grew bright, and she began to talk rather quickly and in an excited manner.

"Oh! do you know, Mr. Trafford," she said, gravely, "I think it is very wrong of you to encourage Mr. Erle to come so often to Beulah Place. Fern is pretty—very pretty, and Mr. Erle is fond of saying pleasant things to her, and all the time he knows Mr. Huntingdon wishes him to marry Miss Selby. He has no right to make himself so agreeable to your sister; and I think you ought to keep him in better order."

"Oh! I don't pretend to be Erle's mentor," he returned, a little sulkily; for he thought he saw her drift to keep him from talking of his own feelings. "I never interfere with other fellows."

"Yes, but Fern is your sister," in a reproachful voice; "and I do think you are to blame in this. Why do you not tell him that he must leave your sister alone, and keep to Miss Selby. Your grandfather would be very angry if he knew of these visits to Beulah Place, and then Mr. Erle would get into trouble."

"I can't help that," was the indifferent answer. "Erle must take his chance with the rest of us; he knows as well as I do the risk he runs." And in spite of her pre-occupation, Crystal noticed a curious change in Percy's tone.

"Do you mean that he would get into serious trouble? is that what you would imply? I do not think you are doing your duty, Mr. Trafford, if you do not warn him of Mr. Huntingdon's displeasure. Mr. Erle is weak, he is easily guided, but he has good principles; you could soon induce him to break off his visits."

"I don't see that I need trouble myself about another fellow's love affair; I have too much on my own mind. Of course you look impatient, Miss Davenport, it is a crime to speak of my own feelings; but how can you expect me to take interest in another fellow when I am so utterly miserable myself."

"Mr. Trafford," she said, trying to control her impatience, "I wish you would let me speak to you for once, as though I

were your friend," she would have substituted the word sister, but she feared to provoke one of his outbursts of indignant pleading.

"You know you may say what you like to me," he returned, moved by the gentleness of her speech, for she had never been so gracious to him before. "You have more influence over me than any one else in the world. If you could make me a better man, Miss Davenport."

"I would give much to do it," she answered, in a low voice that thrilled him strangely. "Mr. Trafford, will you be angry with me if I speak to you very frankly, and earnestly—as earnestly," here she paused, "as though we were bidding each other good-bye, to-night, for a long time."

"If you will call me Percy," he replied, with sudden vehemence, "you shall say what you like to me."

"Very well," she answered, with a faint smile at his boyish insistance, "it shall be Percy then,—no, do not interrupt me," as he seemed about to speak. "I am very troubled and unhappy about Mr. Erle's visits; they are doing harm to Fern, and I must tell you, once for all, that you are not doing your duty either to your sister or cousin."

"Erle again," he muttered, moodily.

"Yes, because the matter lies very close to my heart, for I dearly love your sister. Mr. Trafford—Percy, I mean—you have youth, health, talents—the whole world lies before you; why do you envy your cousin, because he is likely to be a richer man than you?"

"He has robbed me of my rightful inheritance," was the moody answer.

"It could never be yours," she returned, quickly; "a Trafford will never be Mr. Huntingdon's heir."

"I would change my name."

"That would avail you little," with a touch of her old scorn, for the speech displeased her. "Mr. Huntingdon would never leave his money to the son of the man whom he hated, and of

the daughter whose disobedience embittered his life. Mr. Erle has to answer for no sins but his own."

"He had better be careful though," was the quick response.

"What, have you done him mischief already? Why—why are you not more generous to the poor boy? Why do you encourage these visits that you know will anger Mr. Huntingdon? Why do you tempt him from his duty? Percy, I implore you to be true to yourself and him. Look into your own heart and see if you are acting an honourable part."

"You are always hard on me," he returned, sullenly. "Who has been blackening my name to you?"

"No one, no one," she answered, quickly; "but you are a reckless talker, and I have gathered much from my own observation. You have told me more than once that you are in debt; sometimes I fear you gamble. Oh!" as a dark flush mounted to his forehead, "I should be grieved to think that this is true."

"You would hate me all the more, I suppose," in a defiant voice.

"Indeed I do not hate you, my poor boy; but you make me very angry sometimes. Do you know me so little as to think I could ever bring myself to love a gambler, or one who tried to rob another of his inheritance—one who was so afraid of poverty that he deserted his mother for the loaves and fishes of the man who was her worst enemy."

"The old story," in a despairing voice; "will you never give me even the benefit of an excuse—will you never allow me to defend myself?"

"I am not your judge," was the cold reply; and then, as she saw the misery of his face, she relented. "Indeed, it is not too late to retrieve the past. If you have debts, if you are in trouble, own it frankly to your grandfather."

"And be turned out of the house a beggar?"

"What of that," she replied, cheerfully; "you have a profession; every one says how clever you are—what a splendid

barrister you will make. You can take pupils; success and money will come to you in time."

"Too late," he muttered; "I cannot free myself. Then, with a sudden change of look and tone, "Crystal, if I do this—if I leave Belgrave House, will you give me a hope of winning you in the future?"

She shook her head; "I cannot give you that hope."

"Why not?" he demanded, fiercely.

"Because I belong to another," she answered, slowly, and there came a wonderful light in her eyes; "and for his sake I will live as I am to my life's end."

They had reached Beulah Place by this time, and Mrs. Watkins' shop was in sight. There were few passers-by, so no one noticed why Percy suddenly stood still and seized his companion's hands.

"You love another man? You dare to tell me this?"

"I tell you this for your own good, and that you may never speak to me again as you have done. You must not be angry with me for telling you the truth; and now will you ring the bell, for there is no need to go through the shop?"

"I am not coming in," he said, hoarsely. "I cannot trust myself."

"Then we will say good-bye here," was the quiet answer, and she pressed his hands kindly. "Forgive me if I have made you unhappy, but indeed it is your fault, and I thought it better to tell you the truth. Good-bye, my poor boy;" but though her voice was full of gentleness and pity, he scarcely heard it. He had wrung her hands, almost throwing them from him, and had turned away without a word.

Crystal looked after him rather wistfully; her heart felt strangely soft to him to-night. "Was it wrong to tell him, I wonder?" she said to herself, as she quickly retraced her steps. "He is terribly reckless, one never knows how he may take things. It was good of him to listen to me so patiently; and now he has gone away sore and angry."

Crystal was walking very fast now, as though she had suddenly remembered some errand. As an empty hansom passed her she hailed it. "Will you drive me to Victoria Station," she said to the man in a business-like tone; "I want to meet the 6.30 train from Singleton. I think there is time."

"None too much," was the somewhat gruff answer, "but my horse is fresh;" and Crystal drew into a corner and tried to curb her impatience by watching the passers-by; but her fear of being too late kept her restless and miserable.

As they drove into Victoria Station a handsome barouche, with a pair of fine bays, attracted Crystal's attention. The footman had got down and was making inquiries of a porter. "Singleton train just due," Crystal heard the man say, as she handed the cabman his fare; and as she quickly passed through the station, the train slowly drew up at the platform.

Only just in time! Crystal pressed eagerly forward, scanning the occupants of all the carriages until she came to the last.

There were two passengers in this compartment; a young lady, with a good-natured freckled face, was speaking to a very tall man who was standing in the centre of the carriage. "You must let me help you out," Crystal heard her say in a pleasant countrified voice, "and wait with you until your friends find you;" and then came the answer in the deep tones Crystal knew so well.

"Thank you, you are very kind. My unfortunate infirmity gains new friends for me everywhere; so after all, you see, even blindness has its alleviations, Miss Merriman."

"Oh, I will be sure to tell papa what you say; it will be such a comfort to him. Now, will you put your hand on my shoulder—it is a deep step—take care;" but as Raby tried to follow this instruction, a little gloved hand, that certainly did not belong to Miss Merriman, gently guided him and placed him in safety."

Miss Merriman nodded and smiled her thanks.

"There, you are all right now. What is the matter, Mr. Ferrers?"

"I thought some one touched me," he returned, with a puzzled look, "and you were on my other side, so I suppose it was some kind stranger."

"Yes, a young lady," as Crystal moved away rather suddenly. "Ah! there is a footman; he seems in search of some one. I will ask him if he be looking for you," and Miss Merriman darted away.

Raby stood quietly waiting, but he little knew that the girl whom he had come to London to seek was standing a few yards from him, trying to see him through the tears that blinded her.

Many people turned to look after the tall, striking-looking man in clerical dress. The felt hat just shaded the pale, massively-cut features. He looked older, Crystal thought, and a little sadder, but the mouth was as beautiful as ever.

Once he looked up as hasty footsteps brushed him, as though he would move aside, but a girlish figure interposed between him and the loaded truck, and again the little hand guided him to safety.

"It is all right—the man says he is waiting for Mr. Ferrers," observed Miss Merriman briskly at this moment. "What horrid things those trucks are; I was afraid one would have knocked you, only the young lady led you away."

"What! a young lady!" asked Raby, quickly.

"Oh, only a tall young lady in brown, who seemed to notice you wanted help. She has gone now—probably a passenger for the down-train."

"I think all young ladies are good to me," returned Raby with grave courtesy, holding out his hand. "I know I have met with a very kind fellow-passenger;" and then, as he took the footman's arm and entered the carriage, Miss Merriman saw the tall young lady in brown walk quickly out of the station, and as she passed her there were tears running down her cheeks.

CHAPTER XXVII

FLUFF GOES TO SEE GRANDPAPA

"Thou, like a little curious fly
That fusses through the air,
Dost pry and pry
With thy keen inquisitive eye.
. . . .
And with many questions, ever
Rippling like a restless river,
Puzzling many an older brain,
Dost thou hour by hour increase thy store
Of marvellous lore.
Thus a squirrel, darting deftly,
Up and down autumnal trees,
Sees its hoard of chestnuts growing swiftly
In a heap upon the leaf-strewn leas."

CLAUDE LAKE.

"AND now, I look almost as smart as the Princess Dove herself."

"I really think you do, Fluff, though you remember her dress was a curious embroidery of rainbows and dewdrops sewn all over with peacocks' eyes; but I assure you I like your white frock much better; and the new hat is very pretty."

"But Fern!——"

"But Fluff!——"

"If I were to be lost—really and truly lost, you know—would the funny old town-crier tell a long story about me, as he did about the dog when we were down by the sea last summer?"

"Of course he would, and mother and I would stand and listen to him and try not to laugh. 'Lost, stolen, or strayed,

a little witch-girl in a clean white frock, rather too much starched; a frilled cape that crackles when she moves, and a pretty broad-brimmed hat.' Well, Fluffy, what does that mysterious look mean? you are very rude to interrupt the old crier," and Fern tried to frown, while Fluff nodded her head sagaciously.

"It would not be stolen or lost, it would be strayed, like the sheep in the turnip-field, when the shepherd turned them all out because they had no business there. Supposing I strayed on purpose, Fern, you must send a crier covered all over with gold lace to find me."

"Indeed! have you lost your senses, Fluff?"

"Never mind the senses; I saw them all five in china in Mrs. Watkins' left hand corner-cupboard, china images she called them, and I thought them so pretty. Give me the fourpence half-penny for buns, Fern—one Bath, two plain, and a half-penny to the sweeper that takes me best over the crossing."

"Oh Fluff, Fluff, do be careful, and mind you do not go too far; come back soon, like a good child."

"Of course I am good on my birthday. What did they do to Ananias and Sapphira, Fern?"

"Dear me, what an odd question, Fluffy!"

"Never mind that; in the Sunday school the teacher always answers the children's questions directly; she is a very nice teacher though she has red hair, but she cannot help that."

"Oh, indeed! so I must tell you about Ananias and Sapphira. What is the matter? how pale you look, my pet. . . . Well, they fell down dead because they had told a lie."

Fluff shifted her pence uneasily.

"That was the lie they told about the land and money that they wanted to keep themselves. I think they were greedy people; one Bath, two plain, and a half-penny for the sweeper. Here is the fourpence, Fern; I don't think I shall be hungry until tea-time. Now, good-bye, I must go."

"Why, Fluff, what nonsense! here, Fluff;" but Fluff was scuttling downstairs as fast as she could go, and Fern was only in time to see her little feet whisking through the shop door.

"I don't believe there is such another child in the United Kingdom," she said to herself, laughing. "She is terribly young for her age, but so amusing; how dull it will be without her this afternoon, and poor Crystal so far away, I wish mother had not let her go, or that she were safe home again;" and Fern sighed as she looked round the empty room.

Now it so happened that Fluff had coaxed her mother to let her take a walk alone on her birthday; this was the treat she had selected for the occasion.

She was to wear her best frock and her new hat that Crystal had trimmed for her as a parting present; and she had promised to be very careful, and not go too far. The fourpence was to be expended in buns—so she and her mother had arranged, but Fluff had secretly intended to put it to another purpose, until her conscientious scruples had obliged her to leave it at home instead of paying the omnibus fare that was to save her poor little legs; they would get sorely tired before they reached their destination.

Fluff ran down several streets, till she was out of breath, and then she fell into a little trot; but first she gave the half-penny to a ragged boy, and begged him earnestly never to tell stories; and after that she asked him the way to Belgravia. Not getting a lucid answer from him, as he only told her that he had been a cripple from his birth and had sold lucifers ever since, which, being brimstone, was bad for the rheumatics, Fluff told him that she would have repeated the whole story of Ananias and Sapphira to him, only she had no time, and then she resumed her walk with much dignity.

And the method of it was this—if method it could be called which had, in its sidelong movements, the similitude of a crab. First she went into every baker's shop she passed, and, shaking her head sorrowfully at the fresh currant-buns on the

counters, asked in a confidential whisper the quickest and shortest way to Belgravia; and when they wished to know what part, or asked her business, in a kindly way, she pursed up her mouth and said that was not the question, and would they please confine themselves to facts, or some such speech, in her odd abrupt way.

And she looked such a little lady as she spoke, and held her little head up so proudly, that most of them answered her with civility; and one big baker's boy, just starting on his afternoon round, said he would see her past the dangerous crossing in the next street, and put her a little on her way. Fluff said she was very much obliged to him, and trotted confiding by his side, adapting her conversation to her hearer as she thought best, for she enlarged in a rambling way on the Miracle of the Loaves, and told him what her teacher said on the subject of the fishes; and then she became confidential, and explained to him that she bore an innocent partiality for the moist peely bits of soft crusts that one could pare off a loaf without showing a sad deficiency, and how she always liked to take in the bread at Mrs. Watkins' for the purpose; and lastly, she told him in a weary little voice that she was going to see grandpapa, who lived in a big house in Belgravia, but that she was getting very tired, for she had a bone in her leg,—two bones, she thought,—and might she sit please on the top of his little cart to rest her poor legs when he went into the next house?

The baker's boy was a good-natured fellow, but, as he expressed it afterwards, he thought her the rummiest little lady he had ever met; indeed, he confided his suspicions to a grocer's lad that she "was a bit cracky;" but he let her sit on his cart for all that, and trundled her the length of two or three streets; and further revived her drooping spirits by a dab of hot brown bread, scooped skilfully out of the side of a loaf which, as he said, would never show.

After that they got facetious, and admired a Punch and Judy

show together, and parted with deep regret, when a policeman desired them to move on.

Fluff began to feel rather lonely after this. It was getting late, she was afraid, and those little legs of hers ached dreadfully; but she fell in at the park gates with a playful flower-girl, who ran a race with her, basket and all, and then stood and jeered in broad Irish because she was beaten, while Fluff sat down, sulky and exhausted, on a bench under the trees.

It was nearly tea-time now, she thought; in another hour or so Fern would be sending the old crier after her. She wondered how she was to get back. She was very thirsty, and felt half inclined to cry; and then it struck her that the large splendid-looking building opposite might be Belgrave House, and she ran up to a workman just passing and asked him.

"No," he said, eyeing her wondering, "that was not Belgrave House, it was in the next square;" and when she heard that she clapped her hands joyfully, and went and drank out of a little iron bowl in company with a sweep. She asked him if she might drink first, and he said, "Oh, laws, yes! you aint near so smutty as me," which speech Fluff took as a compliment. But she had fallen down twice, and her nice white frock had got unsightly patches of green on it.

But she felt as though her troubles were over when she stood in front of Belgrave House, its many windows shining like gold.

What a grand place it was—finer than the Crystal Ball Palace where Princess Dove and Prince Merrydew lived; and, oh dear, what joy, the door was open!

The footman had just ran out to the pillar box, and another footman was fast asleep in a chair that looked like a baby's cradle turned upside down.

Fluff ran up the steps and looked in.

There was a beautiful scent of flowers as she crept timidly into the hall, such sleepy warm flowers Fluff thought, only they made her head drowsy; and there was a great staircase with

carved balustrades and dark slippery stairs, and the doors were all shut, and there was not a sound in the whole house, except the singing of some birds. Fluff began to feel giddy.

But it was babyish to feel frightened in her own grandpapa's house, so she took courage, and passing the sleepy footman on tiptoe, crept softly up the stairs, holding very tightly to the balustrades, for she felt as though she were slipping every step, and presently she came to a sunny landing-place with a conservatory, where some canaries were singing. Here she saw a half-open door, and pushed it open, and then she thought she was in fairy-land.

It was such a large beautiful room, with marble ladies standing in the corners, with wonderful green plants growing in gilded baskets, and satin couches, and lace draperies, and lovely china; and in an arm-chair a gentleman asleep, for he had his eyes shut.

Fluff stole in and peeped at him; no, he was not asleep, for his eyes opened, and yet he did not seem to see her, perhaps he was thinking. His face looked very nice and kind, and with the unerring instinct of childhood she laid her hand on his knee.

"If you please, sir, will you tell me where I can find grandpapa?"

The gentleman raised his eyes—as Fluff told her mother afterwards, "he looked at me without seeing me;" and then his hand closed quietly over the child's. Nothing ever seemed to startle Raby Ferrers in that strange dreamy life of his.

"Who are you, my child, and who is your grandpapa?"

"My grandpapa's name is Mr. Huntingdon, and he lives in this house—Belgrave House it is called, and I am Florence Trafford, but they call me Fluff at home."

The name roused him effectually; ah, he was startled now. "Florence Trafford, did you say; do you mean that you live at Beulah Place in the Elysian Fields."

"Yes, at Mrs. Watkins'—mother, and Fern, and I, and Crystal too, only she went away this morning."

"Away—what do you mean?" and Fluff's poor little hands were held so tightly that they were quite red and sore afterwards.

"Oh, she has gone to America with that horrid Miss Campion; yes, and she is horrid to take our dear Criss-crass away. Fern cried so this morning, and Crystal cried too, but she had to go, she said, so it was no use making a fuss about it; and she does not mean to come back for a long time. What is the matter?" peering curiously in his face, "does your head ache?"—for Raby had uttered a low groan, and had dropped Fluff's hands, and he was pushing back the heavy dead-brown hair as though he were suddenly oppressed.

Fluff did not wait for his answer; she chattered on very much at her ease.

"Mother and Fern only think I am taking a walk, but I always meant to come and see grandpapa on my birthday. I should think he ought to be very glad to see me; and if he is not," here her lip quivered a little, "I should tell him he is very naughty to live in this beautiful house while poor mother is so poor, and goes out teaching." But, as she spoke, the door had opened softly, and a tall grey-haired man, with a thin erect figure, walked slowly into the room, leaning on Erle's arm, while Percy followed him.

Fluff gave a little exclamation at the sight of the two young men, and then ran towards Mr. Huntingdon, her broad-brimmed hat falling on her neck, and her dark eyes all aglow with excitement.

"I have come to see you, grandpapa," she said, holding out her hand with the air of a little princess; and then, as he did not take it, she continued rather piteously, "please, dear grandpapa, don't be angry with me, for I have come all this way of my own accord, and I am so tired and hungry."

If a thunderbolt had fallen in the midst of that stately room it could not have created a greater sensation.

Erle flushed and looked uncomfortable, a dark frown crossed

her brother's face; Mr. Huntingdon's was inscrutable as usual, only a grey tint seemed to spread over his features, and there was a slight trembling in the hand that held Erle's arm.

Fluff looked from one to the other, and then she touched Erle coaxingly.

"Do ask grandpapa to be kind to me, Mr. Erle," she pleaded. "Percy is always cross, but you have been so good to me and Fern." But a stern voice interrupted her.

"Do you know this child, Erle? she seems to recognise you."

"Yes, sir," stammered Erle, losing colour now as fast as he had gained it; his embarrassment was not lessened by the look on Percy's face. I have seen her when I have been with Percy. She is Florence Trafford, Mrs. Trafford's youngest child, and I expect what she says is quite true, and that she has come of her own accord, though I have no idea how she found her way here."

"How should you, Mr. Erle," returned Fluff, nestling up to her favourite, "when I never told you a word about it, or any of them either? why, bless me, the stupidest of all those stupid owls in the Zoological Gardens, that we laughed at so much, knew more about it than you did. Oh, you need not frown, Percy, you do not come half so often to see poor mother as Mr. Erle does, and he is far kinder to Fern."

"I think you had better hold your tongue, Fluff," replied her brother; but he evidently enjoyed the sight of Erle's discomfiture. "I don't see why you are to be troubled with this sort of scene," he continued, addressing Mr. Huntingdon, who was eyeing Fluff gloomily all this time. "If you wish it I will ring for Roger to take her home."

"No, no, let her be for a moment," he replied, quickly; and Fluff, who had looked terrified at Percy's proposition, came closer and rubbed her curls delightedly against his coat-sleeve.

"That's right, grandpapa. I have not spoken to you yet, have I? and I have so much to say. I was that little baby you

know whom mother carried through the snow that night. Yes," as Mr. Huntingdon shuddered, "I heard mother tell Fern all about it one night when they thought I was asleep—only I got sleepy and lost half; but I said to myself, 'I shall go and tell grandpapa that poor mother is very miserable and unhappy, and that he must come and take care of her.'"

"There, there, you have said your lesson very prettily," observed Mr. Huntingdon with a sneer. "Children are apt parrots;" but Erle saw that his sneer was forced, and that he sat down like an old man, and he said, earnestly:

"Oh, sir, do not think so badly of your daughter. She has not sent the child on this errand. I would stake my life on it."

"And how long have you taken upon yourself to defend my daughter, Mrs. Trafford?" asked his uncle coldly. Erle almost repented of his generous impulse when he heard that hard relentless voice. They had not noticed their visitor, and Raby, at the other end of the great room, lost much of what was passing, he was so absorbed with his own bitter disappointment. As Erle was silent a moment, Mr. Huntingdon repeated his question.

"Since he knew I had a pretty sister," replied Percy, carelessly.

Erle turned round and their eyes met, but Percy's fell before that glance of utter contempt; Mr. Huntingdon intercepted the look between the young men.

"I was not speaking to you, Percy," he observed, curtly; "I should have thought it was your place to take your mother's part, but you chose to be silent. Well, it is no affair of mine. Erle, will you be good enough to answer me a question or two, and then I will trouble you to send the child home. How often have you visited at my daughter's house?"

"I can hardly answer that question, sir; I have been several times."

"Did Percy take you?"

"In the first instance, yes; but I have been there alone too," for Erle's truthful nature scorned subterfuge. The crisis he had dreaded had come on him at last; but Percy should not see that he was afraid. He might be weak and vacillating, but he was a gentleman, and a lie was abhorrent to him. Percy's innuendo might work deadly mischief, but all the same he would not shelter himself behind a falsehood.

Mr. Huntingdon's hard look involuntarily softened. This show of manliness on his nephew's part pleased him.

"Of course you went there knowing that I should disapprove of such visits. Tell me, is this Fern of whom my grandson speaks so very attractive?"

"She is very pretty."

"That is all I want to know. Now, will you order the carriage to take the child home? No, stop, I think Roger had better fetch a cab." But at this point Fluff began to cry.

"Oh, I am so tired and hungry," she sobbed, "and all those dreadful bones in my legs, and the crier not come yet. What is the good of a grandpapa if he has no cakes and things, and on my birthday too!"

Mr. Huntingdon smiled grimly.

"Very well, order the child some refreshment, Erle. After all, she is but a starved bit of a thing; see she has what children like best. Percy, come with me a moment, I want to speak to you."

"Oh, thank you, grandpapa," exclaimed Fluff, cheering up at this; and as the door closed on Mr. Huntingdon, Erle knelt down by the child, and wiped the tears from the tired dirty little face that had brought such trouble to him.

And the heart of Fluff was glad within her, for they brought her fruit and cakes and sweet wine on a gold salver, so that she feasted like a king's daughter, or like the Princess Dove herself; and Erle sat by and watched her all the time, though he looked rather grave and unhappy, Fluff thought.

Both of them were rather startled when Mr. Ferrers groped

his way towards them. He had been hidden by the curtain, and Erle had not noticed him.

"Mr. Erle, if you will allow me, I should like to take the child home."

"Of course," rousing himself, and looking a little bewildered, "we were both to have gone this evening. I had ordered the brougham, but I am afraid now that I must ask you to excuse me. There are circumstances—and," here Erle paused and bit his lip.

"There is no need for you to go," returned Raby, sorrowfully; "the bird has flown. This child," putting his hand lightly on Fluff's curly head, "told me before you came in that Crystal had gone to America—she started this morning."

"To America?" exclaimed Erle, in an incredulous voice.

"Yes, but she has told me no particulars. It is hard, very hard, is it not. I find one does not get used to disappointment. It is a heavy blow to my faith. I thought that to-night we should certainly have met."

"I am awfully sorry, Mr. Ferrers, I am indeed. I wish I could have come with you."

"You could not help me. I will take the child home, and talk to those kind friends who have sheltered Crystal; at least I shall hear about her, and know her future movements."

"I think I hear the cab, Mr. Ferrers, and Fluff is fast asleep."

"We will not wake her, poor little thing," returned Raby, lifting her up as he spoke. Fluff grunted contentedly as her head dropped on his broad shoulder. Erle watched them as Roger guided them to the cab. How he longed to accompany them. The next moment he turned with a start, as his uncle's slow footstep paused beside him.

"Erle," he said, "look at this," and he held out a costly ring, a half hoop of diamonds. "I have heard all I wish from Percy. His sense of honour is none of the finest, but he is useful to me. You and I need not heat ourselves in a

perfectly useless discussion. Miss Selby has a right to expect this ring. You are treating her very shabbily, Erle. Come to me to-morrow and tell me you have placed it on her finger."

"And if I refuse?" Erle's pale lips could hardly frame the question.

Mr. Huntingdon smiled ironically.

"I do not think you will refuse, Erle. You are too much a gentleman to treat a woman badly. All the world is saying you and Miss Selby are engaged. You can hardly allow a girl to be talked about."

"But if I prefer another?" stammered Erle.

"Tut, tut, boy, you will soon get over your fancy," returned Mr. Huntingdon, impatiently. "Most young men have half-a-dozen flirtations before they settle down. I suppose I need not tell you that I strictly prohibit any visits to Mrs. Trafford for the future. If you infringe this rule it will be at your own risk;" and then he continued more earnestly—"Erle, I am determined that you shall not disappoint me. You are my adopted son, and I trust my future heir. I have a right to count on your obedience. Come to me to-morrow, and tell me you and Miss Selby are engaged, and all will be well between us." Then, pressing his shoulder gently, and in a voice no one had heard from him since his daughter's loss—"I am an old man, and my life has not been a happy one. Do not let me feel that you have disappointed me too."

CHAPTER XXVIII

"I WANT HIM SO"

No shade has come between
Thee and the sun;
Like some long childish dream
Thy life has run;
But now the stream has reached
A dark deep sea,
And sorrow, dim and crowned
Is waiting thee.

ADELAIDE ANNE PROCTER.

FLUFF woke up before they reached their destination, very much refreshed by her brief nap. When the cab stopped before the side door of Mrs. Watkins', and she caught sight of Fern standing on the threshold, as though she had been waiting there some time, she gave a little cry, and literally jumped into her sister's arms.

"Oh, Fluff, Fluff! what does this mean?" exclaimed poor Fern, who had passed a most miserable afternoon, picturing Fluff being borne in a policeman's arms to the nearest hospital; but Fluff silenced her by an embrace so vehement that it nearly produced strangulation.

"It is all right, Fern, so don't scold me. Grandpapa was not so very angry—at least, only just at first; but he sent me in the beautifullest supper, such nice things on a big gold plate—really gold you know, like Princess Dove's; and Mr. Erle was there, and Percy—and oh! I forgot the poor man in the cab, who is blind—quite blind, but he is very nice too."

"Will you let me explain about your little sister, Miss Trafford," said Raby in his pleasant voice; and Fern, turning in some surprise, saw a very tall man in clerical dress standing beside her, as she afterwards expressed it to her mother, "with the very nicest face she had ever seen." "I do not know if you have ever heard my name; I am Mr. Ferrers, and your friend Miss Davenport, as she calls herself, is my sister's cousin."

"Oh yes, I know," and Fern's voice grew pitiful all at once; "and you have come just as Crystal has left us; did Florence tell you? Oh, I am so sorry, so very sorry."

"Yes, the child told me; but there is much that I want to ask you. May I come in? the cab will wait for me." And then, as Fern guided him up the narrow staircase, she told him that her mother was out—an evening class had detained her; and she had been thankful that this had been the case, and that she should have been spared the anxiety about Fluff. Mrs. Watkins' boy was scouring the neighbourhood, making inquiries of every one he met; and she had just made up her mind to send for her mother when the cab drove up.

"And she really found her way to Belgrave House," asked Fern, in a voice between laughing and crying; "oh, what will mother say," and she listened with eagerness to Mr. Ferrers' account of how the child had accosted him, and of her meeting with Mr. Huntingdon.

Raby himself had been much mystified—he had known nothing of his host's past history; he had thought that the child was only paying an impromptu visit until she mentioned her name. Erle had told him that Mrs. Trafford was Mr. Huntingdon's daughter, and that he had never seen her since her marriage. This clue guided him to the meaning of the sternness in Mr. Huntingdon's voice; but he had hardly understood in what way Erle was implicated, or why the child should receive so little notice from her brother. When Raby had finished his account, which was annotated in a rambling

and far from lucid manner by Fluff, Fern sent the child away to change her frock and make herself tidy, and whispered in her ear that she might stay with Mrs. Watkins for a little; and when Fluff had left them she began to speak of Crystal, and to answer the many questions he put to her without stint or reserve; she even told him that Crystal had left them on account of Percy's mad infatuation.

"It was very wrong of Percy to take advantage of her unprotected situation, and I am sure she went to put a stop to it, and because it was so awkward for us. Crystal is not like other girls—she does not care for admiration; people turn round and look after her in the street because she is so beautiful, but she never seems to notice it."

"No; you are right," he returned, with evident emotion. As Fern spoke, a scene rose to his memory—a fresh young voice behind his chair seemed to whisper in his ear, "Oh king, live for ever!" and there she stood, his dark-eyed Esther, in her girlish loveliness, her white neck and arms gleaming through lace, a ruby pendant on the slender round throat, the small head looking so queenly with its coils of smooth black hair; and he had turned coldly from her, and she never knew that his was the soul of a lover. "No; you are right," he answered, gently; "she was as guileless and innocent as a child."

Fern looked at him wistfully; all her heart seemed to go out to this sad, noble-looking man. Crystal had not said too much in his praise; but he looked older than she had imagined—for pain and the knowledge of his shorn and wasted powers had aged him, and there was certainly no youth in his aspect.

"Oh," she said, eagerly, for she longed to say something that would comfort him, "I think sometimes that there is no one so good as Crystal—we have all grown to love her so. She has such high-spirited, troublesome pupils; but she is so patient with them when they are ill, she nurses them, and she

has more influence over them than the mother; and she is always so kind and thoughtful, and no one ever sees her cross. She is angry with Percy sometimes; but then he deserves it; and she will not take any pleasure, but all she thinks about is to do little kindnesses for people; and though she is so unhappy that she has grown quite thin with fretting, she tries not to let us see it."

"Has she told you all about herself?" he asked, in a very low voice.

"Yes, and it is that that makes her so unhappy. Oh, she told me all about it, and I thought she would never, never stop crying—it preys upon her mind, and her remorse will not let her be happy; she seems to dread even forgiveness. 'I go back to him when I have blighted his life, and darkened his days?' oh! you should have heard the despair in her voice when she said that, Mr. Ferrers," and here Fern's sweet tones trembled. "Mother and I sometimes think that it will kill her in time, unless she has help and comfort."

"Do not fear, Miss Trafford, she shall have both soon; it will not be long before I find her."

"But she is in America—at least she is on her way there."

"There are other steamers than the one in which she has crossed," returned Raby, with a smile. "I suppose she means to write to you?"

"Oh yes, she will write from every place—she has promised me long letters, and of course Mrs. Norton will hear from Miss Campion; do you really mean to follow her, Mr. Ferrers."

"Yes; and to the world's end if it be necessary. I have a strong will, and even blindness will not hinder me. Tell me how did she seem last night; did she leave cheerfully?"

"Well, no, Crystal puzzled us all last night," returned Fern, quickly; "she went out to bid good-bye to her pupils, and Percy waylaid her as usual, but she got rid of him somehow; but she was out a long time, and she would not give us any reason; but when she came back her eyes were swollen, and

she had a dreadful headache, and yet she said Percy had nothing to do with it."

A sudden, wild idea flashed into Raby's mind. "How was she dressed, Miss Trafford,—I mean what coloured gown did she wear?"

Fern seemed surprised at the question. "Oh, her old brown gown—she was all in brown, I think;" but she did not understand why Mr. Ferrers seemed so strangely agitated at her answer.

"The tall young lady in brown, who seemed to notice you wanted help;" he remembered those words of Miss Merriman. Good Heavens! it must have been she; it must have been her little hand that guided him so gently; oh, his miserable blindness. Of course she had seen this Percy Trafford, and he had told her all about the guest they expected, and she had come to the station just to see him once again.

But he would not speak of this to Fern; his darling's secret should be kept by him; he would hide these sweet proofs of her love and devotion in his own breast. Fern wondered why the miserable harassed look left his face. He looked quite young—a different man—as he bade her good-bye; his shoulders were no longer stooping, his head was erect.

"Good-bye, Miss Trafford," he said. "I shall come and see you and your mother again before I leave. I shall go back to Sandycliffe next week, and set my house in order, and talk to my sister. I do not doubt for a moment that she will offer to accompany me. I shall not come back until I bring Crystal with me." And Fern quite believed him.

There were restless sleepers that night in Belgrave House. Raby was revolving his plans and wondering what Margaret would say; and on the other side of the wall Erle tossed wakeful and wretched, knowing that his fate was sealed, and that Evelyn Selby and not Fern Trafford was to be his future wife. And now, as he lay in the darkness, he told himself that in spite of her goodness and beauty he could never love her as

he loved Fern. He knew it at the moment he asked her to marry him, and when she put her hand in his and told him frankly that he had long won her heart.

"You are too much a gentleman to treat a woman badly," Mr. Huntingdon had said to him, well knowing the softness and generosity of Erle's nature; and yet, was he not treating Fern badly?

He had thought over it all until his head was dizzy; but his conscience had told him that his sin against Fern had been light in comparison with that against Evelyn. What were those few evenings in Beulah Place compared to the hours he had passed in Evelyn's society?

He had been in Lady Maltravers' train for months; he had suffered her to treat him as a son of the house. He had ridden with Evelyn in the Row; she had been his favourite partner in the ballroom. When they had gone to the opera, Erle had been their escort. It was perfectly true, as Mr. Huntingdon said, that she had a right to expect an offer from him; their names had long been coupled together, and Erle's weakness and love of pretty faces had drawn the net round him. And there were other considerations that had moved him—his dread of poverty; the luxurious habits that had become a second nature; and, above all, reluctance to disappoint the old man who, in his own way, had been good to him. Erle knew that in spite of his hardness and severity his uncle clung to him as the Benjamin of his old age.

No, he could not help himself, he thought, bitterly. And yet how dreary the prospect seemed. He had given up the first young love of his life; and now the barren splendours of Belgrave House seemed to oppress him—the walls closed round him like the walls of a prison.

And yet other men would envy him, and wonder at his luck. Evelyn had many admirers—many a one nobly born and nobly gifted would grudge him his prize; though he knew, and hated himself for the knowledge, that they envied him in vain.

Erle found it difficult to play his part well; but his young *fiancée* was too unsuspecting in her happiness to guess at her lover's secret trouble. His slight gravity spoke well for him, she thought; most likely a greater sense of responsibility oppressed him. She was too much in love herself to notice how often he lapsed into silence.

Every one thought him a most devoted lover; he was always at his post—always ready to escort them to picture galleries and flower shows, or to stand sentinel at the back of Lady Maltravers' box. His uncle's generosity enabled him to load his betrothed with gifts. Evelyn used to remonstrate with him for his lavishness, not knowing that Mr. Huntingdon had prompted the gift.

"Of course I love you to bring me things," she would say, looking up in his face with her clear, candid eyes; "but indeed, dear Erle, I do not need so many proofs of your affection."

"I feel as though I should never do enough for you, Eva," he answered, hurriedly; "you must not refuse to let me give you things. I am always thinking how I am to please you;" and as he clasped the diamond bracelet on the slender wrist, he suddenly remembered what a pretty hand Fern had, so white and dimpled, and a vivid longing came over him, turning him nearly sick with pain, to see that sweet face again, and to hear from those frank beautiful lips that she was glad to see him; but he never yielded to the temptation.

On the contrary, he had put all such visits out of his power; for he had written to Mrs. Trafford within a few days of his engagement, telling her that his uncle had interdicted them, and that he dare not risk his displeasure, deeply as he regretted such a break in their intercourse; and he told her that he and Miss Selby were engaged, and would probably be married in the autumn; and then he sent his kind remembrances to her daughter.

Mrs. Trafford thought it a very manly and straightforward

letter. He had not acted so very badly after all, she thought; her father's strong will had evidently coerced him, and she knew how strong that will could be. He had meant no harm; he had only said pleasant things because it was his nature to say them; if only it had not gone very deep with Fern.

"I have had a letter from Mr. Erle, my darling," she said, quietly, as she noticed the girl had turned a little paler, as though she had recognised the handwriting; but she had not spoken, only bent lower over her work.

"Yes, mother," in a very low voice; "and I suppose he has told you the news."

"What news, my pet?"

"That he and Miss Selby are engaged. Oh yes, I knew it directly I saw the letter. It is good of him to tell us so soon. I am glad; you must tell him we are glad, mother."

"Will that be the truth, Fern?" looking at her doubtfully.

"One ought to be glad when one's friends are happy," was the unsteady answer. "If he loves her, of course he must want to marry her. Crystal says that she is very handsome and looks so nice. You must write a very pretty letter to him, mother, and say all sorts of kind things. And it is for us to be glad that he has got his wish, for I think he has not looked quite happy lately." And Fern folded up her work in her old business-like manner, and then went about the room putting little touches here and there; and if she were a little pale, the dusk soon hid it. Mrs. Trafford had no fault to find with her daughter that evening; nevertheless she did not feel easy; she thought girlish pride was bidding her conceal the wound, and that in reality her child was unhappy.

If any one had asked Fern what were her feelings when she saw that letter in her mother's hands she would have answered most truly that she did not know. When a long-dreaded trouble that one knows to be inevitable at last reaches one, the mind seems to collapse and become utterly blank; there is a painless void, into which the mental vision refuses to look.

Presently—there is plenty of time; life is over long for suffering—we will sit down for a little while by the side of the abyss which has just swallowed up our dearest hopes.

Numbness, which was in reality death in life, blunted Fern's feelings as she worked, and talked, and fulfilled her little duties. When she went up to her room, and looked at Crystal's empty bed, she thought the room had never looked so desolate. She undressed slowly, with long pauses, during which she tried to find out what had happened to her; but no real consciousness came until she laid her head on the pillow and tried to sleep, and then found her thoughts active. And the darkness seemed to take her into its black arms, and there seemed no rest anywhere. They were all over—those beautiful dreams that had glorified her life. No bright-faced young prince would ride out of the mist and carry her away; there would be no more kind looks full of deep wonderful meanings for her to remember over her work; in the morning she would not wake and say, "Perhaps he will come to-day;" no footstep would make her heart beat more quickly; that springy tread would never sound on the stairs again. He was gone out of her life, this friend of hers, with his merry laugh, and his boyish ways, and that pleasant sympathy that was always ready for her.

Fern had never imagined that such sad possibilities could wither up the sweet bloom of youthful promise; she had never felt really miserable except when her father died, and then she had been only a child. She wondered in a dreary, incredulous way if this was all life meant to bring her—every day a little teaching, a little work, quiet evenings with her mother, long streets that seem to lead nowhere; no meadows, no flowers, no pretty things except in the shop windows; would she still live over Mrs. Watkins' when she was an old woman?

"Oh, how empty and mean it all seems," she moaned, tossing restlessly on her hot pillow.

"Are you awake still, my darling?" asked her mother, tenderly.

Some instinctive sympathy had led her to her child's door, and she had heard that impatient little speech. "What is the matter, dearest; you will tell your mother, will you not?"

"Oh, mother, why have you come? I never meant you to know. But here she broke down, and clasped her mother's neck convulsively. "I am glad—I will be glad that he is happy; but oh, mother, I want him so—I want him so." And then Mrs. Trafford knew that the wound was deep—very deep indeed.

CHAPTER XXIX

A GLIMPSE OF THE DARK VALLEY

"Not alone unkindness
Rends a woman's heart;
Oft through subtler piercings
Wives and mothers die.
. . . . . .
Though the cord of silver
Never feel a strain;
Though the golden language
Cease not where ye dwell,
Yet remaineth something
Which, with its own pain,
Breaks the finer bosom
Whence true love doth well.
. . . . . .
O this life, how pleasant
To be loved and love,
Yet should love's hope wither
Then to die were well."

PHILIP STANHOPE WORSLEY.

EVERY one noticed at the Hall that Lady Redmond was sadly altered in those days—every one but one, and that was her husband.

Had Sir Hugh's indifference made him blind? for he completely ignored the idea of any change in her. She was pale and thin—very thin, they told him. Hugh said he supposed it was only natural; and when they spoke of her broken rest and failing appetite, he said that was natural too.

They must take better care of her, and not let her do so much. That was his sole remark; and then, when she came

into the room a few minutes afterwards to bathe his aching head, and read him to sleep, or to sit fanning the teasing flies from him for the hour together, Hugh never seemed to notice the languid step, or the pale tired face out of which the lovely colour had faded.

His Wee Wifie was such a dear, quiet little nurse, he said, and with that scant meed of praise Fay was supposed to be satisfied.

But she knew now that all his gentle looks and words were given her out of sheer pity, or in colder kindness, and shrank from his caresses as much as she had once sought them; and often, as she spoke to him, the shamed conscious colour rose suddenly to her fair face, and broken breaths so impeded her utterance that her only safety was in silence. Scarcely more than a child in years, yet Fay bore her martyrdom nobly. Unloved, unhelped, she girded on her heavy cross and carried it from day to day with a resignation and courage that was truly womanly; and hiding all her wrongs and her sorrows from him, only strove with her meek young ways to win him yet.

But as time went on her love and her suffering increased, and the distance widened miserably between them.

Sometimes when her trouble was very heavy upon her—when Hugh had been more than usually restless, and had spoken irritably and sharply to her—she would break down utterly, and nestle her face against his in a moment's forgetfulness, and cry softly.

Then Hugh would wonder at her, and stroke her hair, and tell her that she had grown nervous by staying at home so much; and then he would lecture her a little in a grand marital way about taking more care of herself, until she dried her eyes, and asked him to forgive her for being so foolish; and so the pent-up pain that was within her found no outlet at all.

"Oh, if he will not love me—if he will not try to love me, I must die," cried the poor child to herself; and then she would

creep away with a heart-broken look on her face and sob herself to sleep.

Ah, that was a bitter time to Fay; but she bore it patiently, not knowing that the days that were to follow should be still more full of bitterness than this.

Sir Hugh was getting better now—from the hour he had seen Margaret there had been no relapse; but he was struggling through his convalescence with a restless impatience that was very trying to all who came in contact with him.

He was longing for more freedom and change of air. He should never grow strong until he went away, he told Fay; and then she understood that he meant to leave her. But the knowledge gave her no fresh pain. She had suffered so much that even he could not hurt her more, she thought. She only said to him once in her shy way, "You will be at home in time, Hugh; you will not leave me to go through it all alone?" And he had promised faithfully that he would come back in plenty of time.

And the next morning she found him dressed earlier than usual and standing by the window in the library, and exclaimed at the improvement; and Hugh, moving still languidly, bade her see how well he could walk. "I have been three times round the room and once down the corridor," he said, with a smile at his own boasting. "To-morrow I shall go out in the garden, and the next day I shall have a drive."

And a week after that, as they were standing together on the terrace, looking towards the lake and the water-lilies, Hugh, leaning on the coping, with a brighter look than usual on his wan face, spoke cheerfully about the arrangements for the next day's journey.

He was far from well, she told him, sadly, and she hoped Saville would take great care of him; and he must still follow Dr. Martin's prescriptions, and that was all she said that night.

But the next day, when the servants were putting the portmanteaus on the carriage, and Hugh went into the blue

room to bid her good-bye, all Fay's courage forsook her, and she said, piteously, "Oh, Hugh, are you really going to leave me? Oh, Hugh, Hugh!" And, as the sense of her loneliness rushed over her, she clung to him in a perfect anguish of weeping. Sir Hugh's brow grew dark; he hated scenes, and especially such scenes as these. In his weakness he felt unable to cope with them, or to understand them.

"Fay," he said, remonstrating with her, "this is very foolish," and Fay knew by his voice how vexed he was; but she was past minding it now. In her young way she was tasting the bitterness of death. "My dear," he continued, as he unloosened her hands from their passionate grasp, and held them firmly in his, "do you know what a silly child you are?" and then he relented at his own words, she was such a child. "I told you before that I should never be well until I went away, but you evidently did not believe me. Now I cannot leave you like this, for if you cry so you will make yourself ill; therefore, if you will not let me go quietly, I cannot go at all."

"No, no," she sobbed; "don't be so angry with me, Hugh, for I cannot bear it."

"Well, will you promise me to be a brave little woman and not fret after me when I am gone?" he went on more gently. "It is only six weeks, you know, Fay, and I have promised to be back in time."

"Yes, yes, I know you will," she answered, "and I will be good—indeed I will, Hugh; only tell me you are not angry with me before you go, and call me your Wee Wifie as you used when you first brought me home;" and she held up her wet face to him as though she were a child wanting to be kissed and forgiven.

"You foolish birdie," he said, laughing, but he kissed her more fondly than he had done yet. "There, you will take care of yourself, my own Wee Wifie, will you not, and write long letters to me, and tell me how you are getting on."

"Yes, Hugh," she replied, quietly; and then he put her down

from his arms. She had taken the flower from his button-hole, and stood fondling it long after he had driven off.

"Had you not better lie down, my lady?" Mrs. Heron said to her a little while afterwards, when she found her still standing in the middle of the room; and she took hold of her gently, for she did not like the look in my lady's eyes at all; and then she laid her down on the couch, and never left her until she had fallen asleep, like a child, for very trouble.

And then she went down and spoke out her mind to Janet; and the substance of her speech might be gathered from the concluding sentence.

"And I am sorry to say it, Janet, of any one to whom I am beholden for the bread I eat, and whom I have known since he was a baby; but, in spite of his bonnie looks and pleasant ways, Sir Hugh is terribly selfish; and I call it a sin and a shame for any man to leave a sweet young creature like that at such a time. What can he expect if she goes on fretting herself to death in this way?"

Fay could not tell why she felt so strangely weak the next day when she woke up, and Mrs. Heron could not tell either. She did not fret; she did not even seem unhappy; she was too tired for anything of that sort, she said to herself; but day after day she lay alone in her little room with closed eyes and listless hands; while Nero lay at her feet wondering why his little mistress was so lazy, and why she wasted these lovely summer mornings indoors instead of running races with him and Pierre.

No, she was not ill, she assured them, when Mrs. Heron and the faithful Janet came to look after her, and to coax her with all kinds of dainties; she was only so tired, and would they not talk to her, for she felt as though she could never sleep enough; and would some one tell Sir Hugh so when they wrote to him, for he would get no long letters from her now—she had tried to write, but her hand was too weak to hold the pen. But for all that she would not own she was

ill; it was only the heat that made her so lazy, she said again and again. No, they must only tell Sir Hugh that she was very tired.

But when a few more days had passed, Mrs. Heron thought she had been tired long enough, and sent for Dr. Martin.

He looked very grave when he saw her, and Fay smiled to herself, for she said, "The time is very near now, and then he thinks that I shall die."

But Margaret's reproachful speech came back to her—"Would you wish to die without winning your husband's love?" and to the alarm of the good housekeeper she suddenly became hysterical and begged her to send for Sir Hugh.

But her piteous request was forgotten for a time, for before night her life was in danger.

Hour after hour the desolate young creature looked death in the face and found him terrible, and called out in her agony that she was afraid to die unless Hugh would hold her hand; and for many a long day after that Fay did not see her baby boy, for the least excitement would kill her, the doctor said, and her only chance was perfect quiet.

And the urgent letters that were sent did not reach Sir Hugh for a long time, for he was wandering about Switzerland. He had carelessly altered his route, and had forgotten to tell Fay so.

But on his homeward route, which was not until the six weeks were past, he found a budget awaiting him at Interlachen.

Hugh was deeply shocked when he heard of his wife's danger, and blamed himself for his selfishness in leaving her.

The trip had refreshed him, but the idea of returning home was still irksome to him. He had enjoyed his freedom from domestic restraint; and he had planned a longer route, that should end in the Pyramids, when Fay was well and strong again. It would not matter then; but he was a brute, he confessed, to have left her just at that time. Then he added in self-extenuation that he was not quite himself.

And one lovely summer morning, when Fay lay like a broken lily on her pillow, and looked languidly out upon the world and life, they brought her baby to her and laid it in her weak arms; and Fay gazed wonderingly into a dimpled tiny face and blue-grey eyes that seemed to her the counterpart of Hugh's eyes; and then, as she felt the soft breathing of the warm nestling thing against her shoulder, and saw the crumpled hand on her breast, a new, strange flood of happiness came into her starved heart.

"Hugh's little boy," she whispered, and a tender look shone in her eyes; and then she added, "he will love me for my baby's sake."

And she was very happy in her belief.

As long as they would let her, she lay cradling her boy in her feeble arms and whispering to him about his father; and when night came she would lie awake happily trying to hear baby's soft breathing in the bassinet beside her, and if he woke and cried, she would ask the nurse to lay him beside her.

"He will not cry when he is with his mother," she would say, with maternal pride. "He is always so good with me; indeed, I never knew such a good baby," which was not wonderful, considering her experience had been confined to Catharine's baby at the lodge. And if the nurse humoured her, Fay would cover the little downy head with noiseless kisses, and tell him not to cry, for father was coming home to love them and take care of them both.

"You will love me now; yes, I know you will, Hugh," she would murmur softly when baby was slumbering peacefully in his blankets again, and nurse had begged Lady Redmond not to think any more about Master Baby, but to go to sleep." And as she obediently closed her eyes, the happy tears would steal through her eyelids.

Poor innocent child! when she had first discovered that Hugh did not love her, her despair had nearly cost her her

life; but no sooner was her baby brought to her than hope revived, for from the depths of her sanguine heart she believed that by her boy's help she should win his love; not knowing in her ignorance that Hugh might possibly care nothing for the son though he desired the heir, and the baby charms that had been so potent with her should possess no magic for him.

CHAPTER XXX

"IT IS ALL OVER, BABY"

"Sleep and rest, sleep and rest,
Father will come to thee soon,
Rest, rest on mother's breast,
Father will come to thee soon;
Father will come to his babe in the nest,
Silver sails all out of the west
Under the silver moon:
Sleep, my little one, sleep, my pretty one, sleep."

TENNYSON.

IT was on a hot thundery July afternoon that Sir Hugh entered Redmond Hall, weary and heated and dusty, and thoroughly ashamed of himself.

There are some men who hate to be reminded of their own shortcomings—who are too proud and impatient to endure self-humiliation, and who would rather go through fire and water than own themselves in the wrong. Sir Hugh was one of these. Despite his moral weakness, he was a Redmond all over, and had a spice of the arrogance that had belonged to them in the old feudal days, when they had ruled their vassals most tyrannically. And especially did he hate to be reminded by word or deed that his conduct had not been faultless; his conscience made him uncomfortable enough, for he was really kind-hearted in spite of his selfishness; so it did not improve matters when Mrs. Heron met him in the hall, and, quite forgetting her usually stately manners, suddenly burst out, while her tearful eyes gave emphasis to her words:

"Oh, Sir Hugh, I am grateful and thankful to see you again, for we thought my lady would have died in her trouble; for, bless her dear heart, she fretted herself cruelly when you left her, and more's the pity!"

The housekeeper had meant no reproach to her master, but Sir Hugh's uneasy conscience took alarm.

"Thank you, Mrs. Heron," he said, with icy politeness, "I am deeply indebted to you for reminding me of my shortcomings. Ellerton, be good enough to tell Lady Redmond's nurse that I am here, and that I wish to see my wife at once;" and he passed on in a very bad humour indeed, leaving Mrs. Heron thoroughly crestfallen by her master's unexpected sarcasm.

Ellerton was an old servant, and he ventured to remonstrate before carrying out this order.

"Will you not get rid of a little of the dust of your journey, Sir Hugh, and have some refreshment before you go up to my lady?"

"You have my orders, Ellerton," returned his master, curtly; and he ascended the staircase with the frown still heavy on his face.

He did not like to feel so ashamed of himself, and this was his mode of showing it.

Fay lay on a couch in her bedroom looking very lovely, in her white tea-gown trimmed with lace, with her brown hair hanging in long plaits, and a little rose-leaf colour tinting her cheeks. She was listening with a beating heart for the well-known footsteps; as they sounded at last in the corridor and she heard his voice speaking to Ellerton, she sat up, flushed and trembling, and under the soft shawl something that lay hidden stirred uneasily as she moved.

"You must not excite yourself, my lady," observed the nurse, anxiously; but she might as well have spoken to the wind, for Fay seemed to have forgotten her presence.

"Oh, Hugh, my darling husband!" she exclaimed, as the

door opened; and the tender rose flush deepened in her cheeks as she stretched out her hand to him with her old smile.

Hugh stooped over the couch and kissed her, and then sat down with rather a dissatisfied expression on his face; he thought they had made a fuss to frighten him, and bring him home—she did not look so very ill after all.

"I could not come to meet you, love," she said, with a little clasp of his hand, and she kissed it in her old way, and laid it against her face.

"My dear Fay," he remonstrated, and bit his lip. "Nurse, you can trust your patient in my care. I will ring for you in a little while." Then, as the door closed behind her, he said in a vexed tone, "Fay, why will you be so childish? you know that I object to demonstration before the servants, and have told you so, and yet you never seem to remember; do try to be a little more dignified, my dear, and wait until we are alone." And this to her who had come back to him through "The Valley of the Shadow of Death," bringing his boy with her!

Fay became very white, and drew her hand away. "You do not seem to remember how very ill I have been," she faltered. And then the baby's blind wandering touches over her breast soothed her.

Hugh grew a little remorseful.

"My dear, I assure you I have not forgotten it; I was very grieved to hear it, and to know that you should have been alone in your trouble; but was it my fault, Fay. Did you keep your promise to me not to fret yourself ill when I was gone?"

"I kept my promise," she replied, quietly; "the fretting and the mischief were done before. We will not talk about my illness; it is too bad even to think of it. Have you nothing else to say to me, Hugh? do you not wish to see our boy?"

Hugh started, conscience-stricken—he had forgotten his child altogether; and then he laughed off his confusion.

"Our boy! what an important Wee Wifie. Yes, show him

to me by all means. Do you mean you have got him under that shawl?"

"Yes; is he not good?" returned Fay, proudly; she had forgotten Hugh's coldness now, as she drew back the flimsy covering and showed him the tiny fair face within her arms. "There, is he not a beauty? Nurse says she has never seen a finer baby boy for his size. He is small now, but he will grow; he has such long feet and hands that, she assures me, he will be a tall man. Mrs. Heron says he is a thorough Redmond. Look at his hair like floss silk, only finer; and he has your forehead, dear, and your eyes. Oh, he will be just like his father, the darling!"

"Will he?" returned Hugh, dubiously, and he touched him rather awkwardly—he had never noticed a baby closely before, and he was not much impressed with his son's appearance; there was such a redness, he thought, and no features to be called features, and he had such a ridiculous button of a mouth. "Do you really call him a fine baby, Fay?"

"Fine! I should think so; the smallness does not matter a bit. You will be a big man some time, my beauty, for you are the very image of your father."

"Heaven forbid!" ejaculated Hugh; he was quite appalled at the notion of any likeness between this absurd specimen of humanity and himself; but happily the little mother did not hear him, for she was adjusting the long robe to her liking.

"There, you must take him, Hugh; I want to see him once in your arms—my two treasures together;" and she held the baby to him.

Hugh did not see how the weak arms trembled under their load, as he retreated a few steps in most genuine alarm.

"I take him! My dear, I never held a baby in my life; I should be afraid of dropping him; no, let him stop with his mother. Women understand these sort of things. There, now, I thought so, he is going to cry;" and Hugh's discomfited look was not lost on Fay, as the baby's shrill voice spoke well for his strength of lungs.

"Oh, hush, hush," she said, nearly crying herself, and rocking the baby to and fro feebly. "You spoke so loudly, Hugh, you frightened him; he never cries so when we are alone."

"You will be alone directly if you do not send him away," was her husband's impatient answer; "it is not pleasant for a man to be deafened when he is tired after a long journey. Why, I do believe you are going to cry too, Fay; what is the good of a nurse if you exhaust yourself like this?" And he pulled the bell rope angrily.

"Oh, please don't send my baby away," she implored, in quite a piteous voice; "he is always with me now, and so good and quiet, only you startled him so."

"Nonsense," he returned decidedly; "your illness has made you fanciful; surely I must know best what is good for my wife. Nurse, why do you allow Lady Redmond to wear herself out with a crying child? it cannot be right in her weak state."

Fay gave up her baby without a word; she was too gentle to remonstrate, but if he could have read her thoughts. "He does not care for his child at all," she was saying bitterly to herself; and then she was very quiet, and shielded her face with one hand. Sir Hugh was rather uncomfortable; he knew he had been out of temper, and that he was disappointing Fay, but he never guessed the stab that he had inflicted when he had refused to take their boy in his arms.

"Well, Fay," he said, in rather a deprecating manner, "I meant to have had a little talk with you, now that noisy fellow is gone; but you seem sleepy, dear; shall I leave you to rest now, and come up again after dinner?"

Fay uncovered her eyes and looked at him rather oddly, he thought, but she made no answer. Hugh rose and looked at his watch, and repeated his question.

"No," she said, very slowly; "do not trouble to come up again, Hugh. I cannot talk to you to-night; I shall be better quiet."

"There, I told you so," he cried, triumphantly. "I knew that little rascal had tired you."

"My baby never tires me," she answered, wearily, and closed her eyes. Oh, if she could only close them for ever! But then she remembered how terrible death had seemed to her in her illness—a pit of infinite pain.

Hugh looked at her a little puzzled; his Wee Wifie was very much altered, he thought; and then he kissed her two or three times with some affection, and went to his dressing-room.

But when she heard him go downstairs she rang for the nurse to bring back her baby directly. The woman did not like her excited look, or the fierce way she almost snatched him to her bosom.

"You had much better try and get a little sleep, my lady," she said, kindly; but Fay only shook her head. It was not bed-time yet, she said, but she would like to be quiet with her baby for a little. And when nurse had gone to have a chat with Janet, she tottered from the couch, and knelt down beside it, and laid her helpless arms about her baby's neck, and wetted the white robe with her tears.

"It is all over, baby," she moaned; "he does not care for you or for me either—he only wants Margaret; but you must love your mother, baby, and grow up and comfort her, for she has no one but you to love her in the whole wide world."

Lady Redmond had a serious relapse after this, and it was two or three weeks before she was carried to the couch again.

* * * * *

Hugh had not learned his lesson yet. Neither his wife's illness nor his own had taught him wisdom; he was as restless and unreasonable as ever.

He grew very impatient over Fay's prolonged weakness, which he insisted was due in a great measure to her own fault. If she had not excited herself so much on the night of his return, she would never have had that relapse. It was a very tiresome affair altogether; for his own health was not thoroughly

re-established, and a London physician had recommended him a few months' travel; it was just what he wanted, and now his trip to Cairo and the Pyramids must be indefinitely postponed.

He rather obstinately chose to believe that there was a want of will in the matter, and that Fay could throw off her weakness if she liked. Still he was very kind to her in his uncertain way—perhaps because the doctors said he must humour her, or she would fade away from them yet. So he told her that she would never get strong while she lay moping herself to death in that little painted bird-cage, as he called the blue room. And when she answered listlessly that she could not walk,—which he was at first slow to believe,—he used to carry her down to one of the sunniest rooms in the old Hall—into either the morning-room or library—and place her comfortably on her couch with her work and book before he started out for his ride.

It was a new thing to have those strong arms performing such gentle offices for her. Fay used to thank him gratefully with one of her meek, beautiful looks, but she seldom said anything—his kindness had come too late to the poor child, who felt that her heart was slowly breaking with its hopeless love. For who would be content with the mirage when they are thirsting for the pure water? Or who would be satisfied with the meted grain and the measured ounce when they have given their all in all?

Those looks used to haunt Hugh as he rode through the Singleton lanes; he used to puzzle over them in an odd ruminative fashion.

He remembered once that he had been in at the death of a doe—where, or in what country he could not remember; but she had been overtaken with her fawn, and one of the huntsmen had dispatched her with his knife.

Hugh had stood by and shuddered at the dumb look of anguish in the wild deer-eyes, as with a sobbing breath the poor creature breathed its last, its helpless fawn licking its red wounds. Hugh had not been able to forget that look for a long

time; and now it recurred to his memory, and he could not tell why Fay's eyes reminded him so of the dying doe's—it was an absurd morbid idea. And then he touched his black mare a little smartly, and tried to efface the recollection by a rousing galop. But, do what he would, he could not get it out of his mind that his Wee Wifie was sadly altered; she was not the same Fay whose little tripping feet had raced Nero and Pierre along the galleries with that ringing laugh. This was a tired Fay who rarely spoke and never laughed—who seemed to care for nothing but her baby.

Hugh used to tell her so sometimes, with an inexplicable feeling of jealousy that rather surprised him; but Fay did not understand him.

"What does it matter for whom I care?" she would say to herself. "I must love my own baby." And then she would think bitterly that Hugh seemed to like her better now that she had ceased to vex him with her childish demonstrations. "I am getting very dignified," she thought, "and very quiet; and I think this pleases him. Do old people feel like this, I wonder, when all their life is ended, and they have such feeble, aching limbs? Ah, no; I do not believe they suffer at all. But now I seem as though I can never rest for my longing that Hugh may love me, and tell me so before I die." And so she would prose on in her sad plaintive little way.

No wonder Sir Hugh marvelled at her, so silent of tongue, so grave of look—such an altered Wee Wifie; but all the conclusion at which he arrived was that the baby had been too much for her, and that, when the summer heat was over, she would grow strong again. And Fay never contradicted him.

And by and by, when the days grew a little cooler, Fay began to creep about the garden a little, and call herself well. Hugh drove her out once or twice in her pony carriage; but she saw he did not like it, and begged him to let her go alone—such reluctant courtesies gave her no pleasure. But presently Erle came for a brief visit, and was her ready escort, and after that she really began to mend.

CHAPTER XXXI

FAY'S MISTAKE

"She loves with love that cannot tire,
And when, ah, woe! she loves alone
Through passionate duty love flames higher
As grass grows taller round a stone."

COVENTRY PATMORE.

"Never! 'tis certain that no hope is—none?
No hope for me, and yet for thee no fear,
The hardest part of my hard task is done;
Thy calm assures me that I am not dear."

JEAN INGELOW.

ERLE was quite shocked at Fay's changed appearance, but he said very little about it. He had an instinctive feeling that the shadow had deepened, and that Fay was sick at heart; but he only showed his sympathy by an added kindness, and an almost reverential tenderness; and Fay was deeply grateful for his delicacy, for she knew now that, though she had been blind, others had had their eyes open; and she had a morbid fear that every one traced her husband's restlessness and dissatisfaction with his life to the right cause, and knew that she was an unloved wife. Fay was very proud by nature, though no one would have guessed it from her exceeding gentleness; and this knowledge added largely to her pain. But she hid it —she hid it heroically, and no one knew till too late how the young creature had suffered in her silence.

Erle and she were better friends than ever; but they did not

resume their old confidential talks. Erle had grown strangely reticent about his own affairs, and spoke little of his *fiancée* and his approaching marriage. He knew in his heart that Fay had read him truly, and knew that his warmest affections had been given to Fern, and he had an uneasy consciousness that she condemned his conduct.

Fay never told him so; she congratulated him very prettily, and made one of her old mischievous speeches about "the young lady with the go in her"—but somehow it seemed to fall flat; and she asked him a few questions, as in duty bound, about his prospects, and how often he saw Miss Selby, and if he would bring her down to Redmond Hall one day; "for I mean to be very fond of your wife, Erle, whoever she may be," she continued; "and I hear from the Trelawneys that Miss Selby—but I must call her Evelyn now—is very nice indeed, and that you are to be congratulated."

"She is far too good for me," returned Erle, with a touch of real feeling, for his *fiancée's* unselfish devotion was a daily reproach to him. Could any girl be sweeter or more loving, he thought.

Fay sighed as she watched him. Erle had changed too, she said to herself; he was nicer, but he had lost his old careless merriment; he looked graver, and a little thin, and there was not always a happy look in his eyes. Fay sometimes feared that the other girl with the fair hair had not been forgotten; she wanted to tell him that she hoped Evelyn knew all about her, but she lacked the courage, and somehow it was not so easy to talk to Erle this time.

But there was one subject on which he dilated without reserve, and that was on Mr. Ferrers' search for Crystal. He was in New York now, he told Fay, with his sister, and he was waiting for further intelligence before he followed Miss Davenport. "Miss Trafford corresponds with him," he continued, with an effort; "but it seems the travellers have little time for writing." But he wondered, as he talked about the Ferrers,

why Fay changed colour so often—he had heard it was a sign of delicacy.

"I am tiring you," he said, hastily; "you are looking quite pale; you want a change sadly yourself, my Fairy Queen." And Hugh, entering the room at that moment, caught at the word and came up quickly to the couch.

"Don't you feel so well to-day, pet?" he asked, kindly; "why are you talking about a change?"

"It was only Erle's nonsense, dear," she said, hurriedly. She never could speak to him without a painful blush, and it always deepened if he looked at her long, as he did now.

"I never saw you look better than you do to-day," returned her husband; she is quite rosy, is she not, Erle? But you are right, and a change will do her and the boy good. I was thinking how you would like to go down to Devonshire, Fay, while I am away?"

"Away?" she said, very quietly; "where are you going, Hugh?"—but there was no surprise in her face.

"Oh, you cannot forget," returned Hugh, impatiently, "unless that baby puts everything out of your head. Do you not remember that I told you that Fitzclarence was coming down this week to arrange about our trip to Cairo."

"No," she replied, "you never said anything about it, Hugh;" which was the truth, for he had never taken the trouble to inform her, though Mrs. Heron had had orders to prepare a room for the expected guest.

"Well, well," rather irritably, "I meant to tell you, but one's memory is treacherous sometimes. He will be down here about Wednesday or Thursday, for in another week we hope to start."

"Indeed," returned Fay, in a tired voice, pulling off her baby's shoe; but, to Erle's astonishment, she manifested no emotion. As for Sir Hugh, he was relieved to find his Wee Wifie was becoming such a reasonable woman. Why, he could talk to her quite comfortably without fear of a scene.

"What will you do with yourself, dear," he continued, briskly. "Don't you think it would be the best thing to go down to Daintree and show your baby to Aunt Griselda?"

"Just as you like," was the indifferent answer. But Erle interrupted her.

"How long do you mean to absent yourself from the bosom of your family, Hugh?"

"Oh, two or three months; we cannot follow out the route Fitzclarence proposed under that time—about ten or eleven weeks, I should say."

"Three months? Well, all I can say is, marriage is not the fettered state we bachelors imagine it to be. I had no idea one could get leave of absence for half that time. I hope my wife will be as accommodating as Fay."

There was a concealed sarcasm in Erle's careless speech that jarred upon Hugh, and he answered, angrily,

"I wish you would not talk such nonsense, Erle. Fay has the sense to know that my health requires complete change, and I shall not be the man I was without it. I ought to have had three months last time, only her illness recalled me. But now I can leave her more happily."

"And you expect to do the trip in eleven weeks with Fitzclarence as the leader of the expedition. Fitzclarence, so renowned for his punctuality—so celebrated for never altering a given route at a minute's notice."

Erle was going too far, and Sir Hugh answered him with decided impatience.

"I did not know Fitzclarence was a friend of yours, Erle; but I never listen to the idle gossip one picks up at one's club. I am perfectly satisfied with his arrangements, and so are the other men—we have two other fellows going with us. Fay, my dear, I should like you to write at once to your aunt, and ask her if she can have you and the boy. The cottage is rather small; do you think you could do without Janet, and only take nurse?"

"Oh yes," replied Fay, in the same constrained voice; but

Erle saw that she had become very pale. But just then Ellerton entered and told his master that some one was waiting to speak to him on business; so the subject dropped.

Erle looked rather wistfully at Fay when they were left alone together. "I am afraid you will be very lonely when Hugh goes away," he said, kindly. "Why need you go to Daintree; you will be dreadfully dull there with only your aunt. I do not see why you should not come to Belgrave House first, while Mrs. Montague is there. She is a very pleasant woman, Fay; and you could do just as you like, and you would see Evelyn, and I am sure you two would soon be great friends. Do come, Fay; and you can go to Daintree afterwards."

Fay shook her head with a faint, dissenting smile; but she was touched by his kind thought for her.

"No, Erle," she said, decidedly, "it would not do at all. Hugh would not like it. He wishes me to go to Aunt Griselda."

"What does it matter to him where you go, so long as he is enjoying himself," burst from Erle's impatient lips; her meekness really provoked him. But he regretted the rash speech as soon as it was uttered, especially when a soft little hand touched his.

"Hush! Erle," she said, gently, "you should not speak like that; not to me at least. Do you not know that I have no greater pleasure in the world than to obey my husband's wishes. No," she continued, and her eyes grew misty, "I have no other happiness but that—no other happiness but that."

"But, Fay," interrupted Erle, eagerly, "what possible objection could Hugh have to your staying at our house while Mrs. Montague is there? We would wait on you, and watch over you, as though you were a queen."

"Yes, yes! I know that—you are always so kind to me, Erle; but it would never do for me to come to Belgrave House. Hugh does not like Mr. Huntingdon."

"Very few people do," muttered Erle; "but he has always been a good friend to my mother and to me."

"Yes, I know; and he is your uncle, so of course you make allowances for him. But Hugh has told me the story of poor Nea Huntingdon; and, somehow, I feel as though I could never visit at Belgrave House until you are master there."

Erle smiled. "When that day comes, Mrs. Trafford shall reap a golden harvest after all her hard work. You do not know how I long to help her, and make life easier for them all. Think of such women living in a place like the Elysian Fields—over that shop too; and yet, if I were to take up their cause now, I should only forfeit my own chances, and do no good. So you mean to be obdurate, my Fairy Queen, and not come to us."

"No, dear," she said, quietly, "I could not come." But she never told him that one of her reasons was that she might possibly meet the Ferrers there, if they were coming back from America; and she felt just now as though she could not have borne such an encounter.

Erle had to go up to London the next day, but the Hon. Algernon Fitzclarence took his place the following evening, and after that Fay had a miserable time; for all day long Hugh and his guest were planning the route for their trip, or talking over previous tours.

Either Fay's knowledge of geography was very limited or her head got confused; but as she listened to them, she felt as though Egypt were thousands of miles away, and as though Hugh would certainly get lost in those trackless deserts, and die of thirst like the poor travellers of whom she had read. It was cruel to leave her for such dangers, she thought. And sometimes she got so nervous that she would make an excuse and leave the room, that she might not hear any more. And then she would wander about the grounds in an aimless way, trying to throw off the oppression that was growing greater as

the days went on. It was not that she did not want her husband to leave her. Her loneliness could not be greater if he went away—so she believed in her wretchedness; but she was so terrified for him. And she had taken a dislike to the Hon. Algernon Fitzclarence. He might be a great traveller, as Hugh told her, and a very amusing companion, but his manners were not to her taste. Fay's innocence instinctively took alarm at the covert admiration conveyed in her guest's looks and words. He was too much a man of the world to pay her open compliments; and indeed her gentle dignity repelled him; but he made her understand that he thought his hostess very charming.

Hugh noticed nothing; he was rather pleased than otherwise that a fastidious man like Fitzclarence should admire his little wife. Fay was certainly very pretty, even in her husband's eyes, and she was so much improved—not half so childish. But it was a relief to Fay when the Hon. Algernon departed. Hugh was to join him in town for a day or two to procure his outfit, and then come back to the Hall to bid Fay good-bye. It was on the second day after their guest had left Redmond Hall that Fay went into her husband's study to dust and arrange his papers as usual.

It was a duty she had taken upon herself from the first. Sir Hugh had a masculine horror of what he called servants' interference—he never allowed them to touch the papers on his writing-table or bureau; and his strictures on the feminine duster were so severe that no one but Mrs. Heron ever ventured even to remove the overflowing waste-paper baskets.

But when Fay came to the Hall she assumed the duty as her right, and took a great pride and pleasure in her task; and Hugh's first marital praise was bestowed on the clever little fingers that tidied without disarranging his cherished papers, and after that the work became her daily pleasure. But this morning there was an unusual amount of disorder and confusion. Sir Hugh had sat up late the previous night sorting

and destroying his letters; and not only the baskets but the floor was heaped with a profusion of torn paper. Fay felt weak and tired, and she went about her work slowly; but she would not ring for a servant to help her; it would be a long time before she tidied Hugh's papers again, she thought. And then her attention was attracted by an unfinished letter lying at the bottom of the *débris* which she first believed had been thrown away by mistake—but on a closer inspection she found it was torn across. But it was in her husband's handwriting. Fay never knew why the temptation came to her to read that letter. A sentence had caught her eye, and an intense wish suddenly seized her to read the whole and know what it meant. Afterwards she owned that her fault had been a great one; but she was to pay dearly for her girlish curiosity.

It was a mere fragment, and was apparently the concluding portion of a long explanatory letter.

". . . And now I have told you all frankly, and however much you may condemn me, at least you will be sorry for me.

"For, indeed, I have done all that a man can do, or at least the best that is in me, and have only been beaten and humiliated at every turn. I can do no more. My illness has exhausted me, and taken away all strength of resistance; and though it may seem cowardly to you, I am forced to run away, for my present life is unendurable. Just put yourself in my place, and think what I must suffer.

"So you must not blame me, dear, if I have come to the conclusion that the same place cannot hold us both—at least, not for a time. One or other of us must leave; and of course it must be I. The misery of it is too great for my endurance, until I can learn to forget the past; and, as I have told you before, Margaret,"—the word lightly scratched through and "I" substituted, only Fay never noticed this,—"I think it right to go; and time and absence will help us both. She is so good and gentle; if she knew all, she would own that this is my duty; but ——" here the letter was torn across, and Fay read

no more. But as she stood there her fingers stiffened over the paper, and an icy chill seemed to rob her of all feeling. She thought that letter was written to Margaret, and now her despair had reached its climax.

Poor, unhappy Wee Wifie; it was a most fatal mistake. That letter had been written by Hugh one night when he could not sleep, and it was addressed to his wife. He had come to the conclusion that he had lived the life of a hypocrite long enough, and that it would be wiser and more honest if he unburdened himself of his unhappy secret and told Fay why he thought it better to go away. He had tried to speak to her once, but she did not seem to understand, and he had grown irritable and impatient; it would be easier to make excuses for himself on paper. He could tell her truly that he was very fond of her, and that he wanted to make her happy. "I mean to make you a good husband," he had said in a previous portion; "one of these days, if you are patient with me, you shall be the happiest little woman in the world."

Hugh never finished this letter; something happened to distract his attention, and he never found an opportunity of completing it. The night before he had read it over, and the beginning had not pleased him. "I will write another when I am away," he said to himself; "I am afraid she will feel herself hurt if she reads this, poor little thing. I have not been sufficiently considerate." Unfortunately, Fay had come to a different conclusion. She thought the letter had been written to Margaret, and that the "she" who was mentioned was Hugh's wife. Yes, it was his wife of whom Hugh spoke, when he said the same place could not hold them both, and for "place" the unhappy girl substituted "house." Hugh could not remain in the same house with her. "She was good and gentle; if she knew all,"—ah! and she did know all—"she would own that it was his duty; his present life was unendurable," and therefore—therefore he was going to Egypt with

that dreadful man who would lead him into danger. "One or other of us must leave, and of course it must be I."

"No, no, my bonnie Hugh," she said at last, with a dim smile, as she lifted up her eyes to his portrait; "if one must be sacrificed it shall not be you—no, my dearest, it shall not be you." And then, in her childish ignorance, she made up her mind that Hugh should not go to Egypt.

"You are very unhappy, darling," she went on, pressing the letter in her hands; "you are terribly unhappy because you cannot love me and care for your boy; but you shall not be troubled with us any longer; and, indeed, I could not stop,—" and here a flush of shame came to her sweet face,—"knowing what I know now. No, baby and I will go, and you shall not leave your beautiful home and get lost in those horrible deserts; you shall stay here and learn to forget all your troubles, and presently you will be happy; and it is I who will go, my dearest."

And it was for this that she had come back to him through "The Valley of the Shadow of Death," bringing her baby with her.

Some strange feverish power seemed to enter into her and give her a fitful strength. She sat down at her husband's desk and began writing rapidly, and as the thoughts came to her; and when she had finished, she enclosed her letter with the torn fragment, and, after addressing it, sealed it carefully. As she did so she heard footsteps approaching the library, and slipped it hurriedly into the open drawer, and the next moment Sir Hugh entered with a telegram in his hand.

"I have been looking all over the place for you, Fay," he began, hurriedly; "and not a soul seemed to know where you were. Look here; I have just had this telegram from Fitz. He wants me to come up to town at once. I believe we have to start earlier than we intended."

And as Fay seemed to have no answer ready, he went on—"I am so vexed about it, my pet, for I meant to have driven

you over to Pierrepoint after luncheon; you looked so pale this morning, and I had to arrange about so many things. Well, it cannot be helped; Saville is packing my 'Gladstone,' and I have not a moment to lose."

"Do you mean you are going off to Egypt now," asked Fay, hardly able to articulate—her lips had grown quite white. What if she should be too late after all!

"Egypt, indeed! What a child you are, Fay; one can never make you understand things. No, I am going up to London to get what I want, and meet Egerton and Powis, the other fellows who are to join us. I shall sleep at the Club to-night, and you may expect me to be down to dinner to-morrow. The next day——" here he hesitated; "well, there is time enough to talk of saying good-bye then."

"Yes, yes, I understand now. Go and get ready; and, Hugh, don't forget to kiss baby."

"All right," he laughed good-humouredly; and then Fay stood quite still, holding the table, till he came back.

"My traps are in the hall; I must say good-bye quickly, darling." How handsome, how well he looked, as he stooped over her with his plaid over his arm.

He need not be fearful of her detaining him; there was no clinging, no agony of weeping this time. She put her two hands round his neck and held him for a moment, as her cold lips touched his, and then stood quite still and waved to him —sadly, quietly—from the window as he drove past, and that was all.

CHAPTER XXXII

"GOOD-BYE—GOOD-BYE"

"I never will look more into your face
Till God says, 'Look!' I charge you, seek me not,
Nor vex yourself with lamentable thoughts
That peradventure I have come to grief.
Be sure I'm well, I'm merry, I'm at ease,
But such a long way, long way, long way off,
I think you'll find me sooner in my grave,
And that's my choice—observe."

E. B. BROWNING.

FAY had made up her mind to be lost.

Could any one imagine anything so utterly ignorant and childish, and yet so pathetic? She was going to lay down her wifely rights and steal away, friendless and unprotected, into the great lonely world, so that Hugh might come back to his old home in peace.

With the rash impulse of despair—of a despair that hoped nothing and feared nothing—she was taking the most terrible step that a young creature could take. She was doing evil that good might come; she was giving up herself in complete renunciation and self-sacrifice in obedience to a miserable and mistaken idea. If she had been older; if her simplicity of character had been less childish, and her worldly knowledge greater, she must surely have hesitated before taking a step that must anger as well as grieve her husband. How would Sir Hugh's haughty spirit brook the disgrace of publicity and the nine days' wonder of the world when they knew

that his wife, Lady Redmond,—the successor of all the starched and spotless dames who hung in the old guest-chambers,—should so forget herself and him as to tarnish his reputation by an act so improper and incredible.

He might forgive his spoilt trip, and all the trouble that awaited him in his empty home; but how will he ever bring himself to forgive that?

But Fay, poor mistaken child, thought of none of these things. She only felt that she must go and take her baby with her. There was no time to be lost, and she must make all her plans very quickly.

Fay's will was a strong one—there was no fear that she would falter in her purpose; but she never remembered afterwards how she carried it out, or from whence came the strange feverish energy that supported her. She was working in a dream, in a nightmare, in a horrible impatience to be gone—to be gone—where. But even this question was answered before many hours were over, for she was to make her poor little plans with the utmost precision. In the quiet evening time, as she paced restlessly through the empty rooms, she thought of a place of refuge where she might rest safely for a little. The moment the carriage had turned the corner, and she could see it no longer, she had taken the letter from the drawer and laid it on the table.

Such an innocent, pitiful little letter it was.

"Darling Hugh," it began, "do not be angry with me when you come back to-morrow and find your Wee Wifie has gone. What could I do—how could I stay any longer after reading your own words. Indeed, I think I could have borne anything but this. No, this one thing I could not bear—that you should leave your home and country to free yourself from me.

"'You must go,' you say; of course it must be you." Darling, do you not know me better than that?

"I felt you could not love me, Hugh; but have I ever

blamed you in my heart? I was too childish and young for such a man as you. Why did you marry me, dear—that was a great mistake. But perhaps you saw I liked you.

"I tried so hard to please you, but somehow I always failed. And then the baby came—our baby—and you did not care for him; and then, indeed, I thought my heart would break. I wonder if you know how I have loved you? I was not too young for that, though you thought I was. I never lay down to sleep without praying God to bless my dear husband, and sometimes—was it very childish of me, I wonder—I put baby's hands together and made believe he was praying too.

"I think if you knew what I suffered, when they thought I was dying, and the angels would not come for me; I think—yes, I do think, Hugh—you would have been sorry for me then.

"Good-bye, my darling—I shall never call you that again, for I am going away for ever. You must not trouble about me, for I shall take great care of myself, and after a time I shall not fret so much. I shall take my baby—he cannot do without me, and I love him so. When he is older I will send him back to you. He is so like you, dear,—a Redmond all over,—and his eyes will remind me of you.

"I shall say good-bye to you very quietly. When I try to speak there is a dreadful lump in my throat that seems to choke me; and I feel as though I could blush with shame for being so little and insignificant in your eyes. You are like a king to me, Hugh; so grand, and noble, and proud. Oh, what made you marry me? You did wrong there, darling, did you not?

"Good-bye, good-bye. I shall be quite lost. Do not look for me; only give me a thought now and then—one kind and gentle thought of your Wee Wifie."

She read through the letter dry-eyed, and kissed it, and laid it on the table. It would touch his hands, she thought. Later on she unsealed it, and added a short postscript. "Do

not be anxious," it said; "I am going to some kind people who will be good to me and the boy."

She had placed the letter where Hugh would see it at once, and then she went upstairs. She wanted to have her baby in her arms, that its touch might lull the deadly faintness at her heart; and when she felt a little better she sent for Mrs. Heron and Janet.

Sir Hugh had gone off to London, she told them; they had telegraphed for him, and she was to follow him immediately. She would take her luggage with her, of course, for she did not intend to return to the Hall before going down into Devonshire; but they would see Sir Hugh again for a few hours—he would probably run up the following evening to give his final orders.

And would she be long away? asked Mrs. Heron. She thought my lady looked very ill, and required a thorough change.

"Yes," returned Fay, quickly; but she turned away as she spoke. She should most certainly be away all the time Sir Hugh was in Egypt. Janet must set to work at once, for they would have to start early. And then she explained that the cottage at Daintree was very small, and that Sir Hugh had begged her to dispense with Janet's services, and only take nurse.

Janet looked very disappointed when Fay said this, for she adored her gentle little mistress. "I don't know what master is thinking about?" she grumbled, in confidence, to Mrs. Heron. "This new nurse has only been here six weeks, and does not know my lady's ways. And who will wait upon her, I should like to know, if I am to be left behind? but it is all of a piece with his selfishness." But she worked with a will for all that, and all the time her boxes were being packed, Fay wandered about with her baby on her arm collecting her little treasures, and dropping them in the boxes as she passed. Now it was a book Hugh had given her, or a picture, or the withered flower

he had worn in his button-hole; an odd glove he had left on his dressing-table, and which she clutched with the greediness of a miser; and even a silk handkerchief he had worn round his neck—she put them all in. Such a strange little assortment of odds and ends. Janet thought she was daft.

And she would have none of her evening dresses packed up, or indeed any of her costly ones—she would not require them in the country, she said, quietly; but she would have all her jewels—not those Hugh had given her, or the old family jewels that had been reset for her, but those that had belonged to her mother, and were exceedingly valuable; there was a pearl necklace that was worth five hundred pounds. Hugh had drawn out a large sum of money that he had given in charge to her—he meant to have left it for domestic expenses while he was away. Fay wrote out a receipt, and put it with her letter. It would be no harm to keep it, she thought; Hugh could help himself to her money. There would be enough to keep her and the boy for more than a year, and after that she could sell her necklace. She was rich, but how was she to draw any more money without being traced to her hiding-place.

The last act before the daylight closed was to go to the stables and bid Bonny Bess good-bye. The groom, who knew that he was to follow in a few days with Bonny Bess and another horse,—for Sir Hugh had been very mindful of his wife's comfort,—was rather surprised to see her kissing the mare's glossy neck, as though she could not bear to part with her; when she had left the stables, Nero, who had followed her about all day with a dog's instinctive dread of some impending change, looked up in her face wistfully.

"Do you want to come with me, Nero?" she asked, sadly; "poor fellow, you will fret yourself to death without me. Yes, you shall come with me; we will go to Rowan-Glen together."

For all at once the thought had come to her of a beautiful spot in the Highlands where she and her father had stayed many years ago. If she remained in England, Hugh would

find her, and she had a dread of going abroad. Besides, what could she do with baby, for of course she must leave nurse behind; she would have to engage a stranger who did not know she was Lady Redmond. And then she bethought herself that she would call herself by her husband's second name St. Clair—she would be Mrs. St. Clair.

Yes, she and her father had had a very happy time at Rowan-Glen. They had been to Edinburgh, and to the Western Highlands, and had then made their way to Aberdeen, as Colonel Mordaunt had some old Indian friends there; and, as they had still some weeks to spare, they had come down to the Deeside, and had fallen in love with Rowan-Glen.

But they could not obtain a lodging in one of the cottages, so the manse opened its hospitable doors to them. The minister, Mr. Duncan, was old, and so was his wife, and they had no children; so, as there was room and to spare, and their income was somewhat scanty, the good old people were quite willing to take in Colonel Mordaunt and his little daughter. Fay had forgotten their existence until now; but she remembered how kind Mrs. Duncan had been to her; and she thought she would go to her, and tell her that she was married, and very unhappy, and then she would let her and baby stop there quietly in the old grey house.

Nobody ever came there, for they were quiet folk, and Mr. Duncan was an invalid; and there was a dear old room, looking out on the old-fashioned garden, where her father had slept, that would just do for her and baby.

Fay had a vague sort of feeling that her strength would not last very long, and that by and by she would want to be cared for as well as baby. Her poor brain was getting confused, and she could not sleep—there was so much to plan before the next day.

Ah, what a night that was. If it had not been for the soft breathing of her infant in the darkness, Fay must have screamed out in her horror, as thoughts of the desolate future came over

her; and yet it was easier for her to go away than to stay on at the Hall an unloved wife—a millstone round her husband's neck.

When Janet called her at the proper time, she found her up and dressed and beginning her baby's toilet.

"Here, Janet," she said, with an unsteady laugh, "I don't think I am putting on baby's things very nicely, but I wanted to try, so nurse let me; but he cries so that he confuses my head." And then she gave him up and went wandering through the rooms, saying a silent good-bye to everything; and last of all she went into her husband's library.

Ellerton found her there when he summoned her to breakfast. She would come in a minute, she said, quietly; she was only arranging Sir Hugh's papers as he liked to have them. Yes, she knew the carriage would be round directly; but Ellerton need not fear that she would be late. And then, when the old servant had closed the door, she went up to her husband's chair, leaning over it and embracing it with her two arms, while she rested her cheek against the carved ebony back. "This is where he will sit this evening," she said. "Good-bye, God bless you, dear;" and then she left the room.

But she would eat nothing, and only asked for her baby. But just before she got into the carriage she called Mrs. Heron to her, and bade her take care of the aged people at the Pierrepoint almshouses, and see they had their little packets of tea and grocery as usual; and then she shook hands with her and Ellerton.

"Good-bye to you all," faltered the poor child, hurriedly. "You have been good friends to me, all of you. Good-bye—good-bye;" and then she drew her veil over her face, and leant back in the carriage, while Nero licked her little ungloved hand.

Sir Hugh had sworn to love and cherish her until death, and yet he had brought her to this.

The journey was a very short one; but nurse afterwards remembered that Lady Redmond did not appear surprised,

when they arrived at Euston, to find that Sir Hugh was not waiting at the station. "What are we to do, my lady?" she asked, rather helplessly, for she was young and a country woman, and the din and bustle were overwhelming to her; but Fay was helping to identify her luggage, and did not answer. She told nurse to go into the waiting-room with baby, and she would come to her presently. And then she had her luggage put on to a cab.

"Nurse," she said, quickly, when she came back a few minutes afterwards, "will you give me baby a moment, and go to the refreshment room—it is just a little way down the station. I should like some sandwiches and sponge-cakes, and perhaps you had better get something for yourself, there is plenty of time;" and the woman obeyed her at once. Her lady looked faint, she thought; most likely she was disappointed that Sir Hugh was not there.

As soon as she had left the waiting-room, Fay went up to the person in charge, and asked her to give a sealed note to her nurse when she came back. "You remember her—the young woman with reddish hair who held baby just now; tell her I have gone to look after the luggage, and ask her to read it." And though the woman thought the request a little strange, she took the sealed packet without demur.

As Fay and Nero went outside the station, the porter who had loaded the cab was standing a little way off. Fay told the cabman hastily to drive off to King's Cross, as she wanted to take the Scotch express; and as the porter came up to claim his gratuity he found the cab driving off, but Fay flung him a shilling. By a strange fatality the cabman who drove them met with an accident that very day, from the consequences of which he died in two or three weeks' time; and this one thing checked all clue. When the inquiries were set afloat, the porter certainly remembered the little lady and baby and the big black dog, but he had not heard her instructions to the cabman.

Fay only took her ticket to York; she dared not go straight to her destination. When she arrived there she would not put up at the station hotel, but had herself driven to a quiet little hotel for the night. It was an unpretending place, kept by very honest folk; but Fay found herself very comfortable. She made some excuse about not bringing her nurse, and the chambermaid helped her undress baby. She was almost too stupefied with grief and fatigue by this time to do anything but sleep helplessly; but she made the girl promise to call her early, and ordered a fly to the station; and when the morning came she got into it without telling any one where she was going, and took the mid-day train for Edinburgh. It would be impossible to describe the nurse's feelings when she opened the packet in the waiting-room and read her mistress's note. "Dear nurse," it said, "I am really very sorry to treat you so badly, but I cannot help it. I have gone away with baby, and I could not take you. Please go back to Singleton by the next train; you will find your box on the platform, and the porter will help you. Sir Hugh will tell you what to do when he arrives this evening.—Your affectionate mistress, F. Redmond." And enclosed were two months' wages. In spite of her youth, Fay had excellent business capabilities, only her husband had never found them out.

But unfortunately for the bewildered household at Redmond Hall, Sir Hugh never arrived that evening. First came a hazy telegram, informing them of a change of programme, and later on a special messenger came down from him bringing a letter from Sir Hugh—a very affectionate farewell letter.

Fitzclarence had acted on impulse as usual, and he and Sir Hugh had started that very night, leaving Powis and Egerton to follow them.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE MANSE AT ROWAN-GLEN

"Weary I am, and all so fair,
Longing to clasp a hand;
For thou art very far, sweet love,
From my mountain land.

"Dear are the clouds yon giant bens
Fold o'er their rugged breasts,
Grandly their straggling skirts lift up
Over the snow-flecked crests.

"Dear are the hill-side glooms and gleams,
Their varied purple hue,
This opal sky, with distant peak
Catching its tender blue.

"Dear are the thousand streams that sing
Down to the sunny sea,
But dearer to my longing heart
Were one bright hour with thee."

HELEN MARION BURNSIDE.

IT was towards evening, at the close of a lovely September day, that a rough equipage laden with luggage, with a black retriever gamboling joyously beside it, crept rather slowly down the long lovely road by the Deeside leading to Rowan-Glen, one of those rare gems of Highland scenery that are set so ruggedly in the Cairngorm mountains.

Fay had just sheltered her sleeping baby from the rays of the setting sun; and sat wearily in the jolting carriage, trying to recall all the familiar landmarks that greeted her eyes.

There were the grounds and preserves of Moncrieff, with their lovely fringes of dark pine-trees and silvery birches, and a little

farther on the wicket gate that led down to the falls or linn of Rowan-Glen.

By and by came a few low cottages built of grey stone, and thatched with heather fastened down with a rough network of ropes. One or two of them were covered with honeysuckle and clematis, and had tiny gardens filled with vegetables and flowers, pinks and roses mingling in friendly confusion with gooseberry bushes and cabbages.

A narrow planked passage ran through the cottages, with a door at the other end opening on to a small field, with the usual cow-house, peat and straw stacks, and a little shed inhabited by a few scraggy cocks and hens which, with "ta coo" herself, are the household property of all, even the poorest, of the Highland peasants.

Fay looked eagerly past them, and for a moment forgot her trouble and weariness; for there, in the distance, as they turned the corner, stretched the long irregular range of the Cairngorm mountains, with the dark shadow of the Forest of Mar at their base; while to the right, far above the lesser and more fertile hills, rose the snowy heads of those stately patriarchs—Ben-muich-dhui and Ben-na-bourd.

Oh, those glorious Highland mountains, with their rugged peaks, against which the fretted clouds "get wrecked and go to pieces." What a glory, what a miracle they are! On sunny mornings with their infinity of wondrous colour so softly, so harmoniously blended; now changing like an opal with every cloud that sails over them, and now with deep violet shadows haunting their hollows, sunny breaks and flecks, and long glowing stretches of heather. Well has Jean Ingelow sung of them:

> ". . . White raiment, the ghostly capes that screen them,
> Of the storm winds that beat them, their thunder rents and scars,
> And the paradise of purple, and the golden slopes atween them;"

for surely there could not be a grander or fairer scene on God's earth than this.

A moment later the vehicle stopped before a white gate set in a hedge of tall laurels and arbutus, and the driver got down and came round to the window "Yonder's t' manse. Will I carry in the boxes for the leddy?"

"No, no, wait a moment," replied Fay, hurriedly. "I must see if Mrs. Duncan be at home. Will you help me out?" for her limbs were trembling under her, and the weight of the baby was too much for her exhausted strength. She felt as though she could never get to the end of the steep little garden, or reach the stone porch. Yes; it was the same old grey house she remembered, with the small diamond-paned windows twinkling in the sunshine; and as she toiled up the narrow path, with Nero barking delightedly round her, the door opened, and a little old lady with a white hood drawn over her white curls, and a gardening basket on her arm, stepped out into the porch.

Fay gave a little cry when she saw her. "Oh, Mrs. Duncan," she said; and she and the baby together seemed to totter and collapse in the little old lady's arms.

"Gracious heavens!" exclaimed the startled woman; then, as her basket and scissors rolled to the ground, "Jean, lass, where are you? here are two bairns, and one of them looks fit to faint—ay, why, it is never our dear little Miss Mordaunt? Why, my bairn——" But at this moment a red-haired, freckled woman, with a pleasant, weather-beaten face, quietly lifted the mother and child, and carried them into a dusky little parlour; and in another minute Fay found herself lying on a couch, and her baby crying lustily in Jean's arms, while the little old lady was bathing her face with some cold, fragrant water, with the tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Ay, my bonnie woman," she said, "you have given Jean and me a turn; and there's the big doggie, too, that would be after licking your face—and for all he knows you are better now—like a Christian. Run away, Jean, and warm a sup of milk for the bairn, and maybe his mother would like a cup of tea and a

freshly-baked scone. There, give me the baby, and I'll hold him while you are gone."

"There's Andrew bringing in a heap of boxes," observed Jean, stolidly; "will he be setting them down in the porch? for we must not wake the minister."

"Ay, ay," returned Mrs. Duncan, in a bewildered tone; but she hardly took in the sense of Jean's speech—she was rocking the baby in her old arms and looking at the pretty, white, sunken face that lay on the chintz cushion. Of course it was little Miss Mordaunt, but what did it mean—what could it all mean?

"Mrs. Duncan," whispered Fay, as she raised herself on her pillow, "I have come to you because I am so unhappy, and I have no other friend. I am married, and this is my baby, and my husband does not want me, and indeed it would have killed me to stop with him, and I have come to you, and he must not find me, and you must take care of baby and me," and here her tears burst out, and she clung round the old lady's neck. "I have money, and I can pay the minister; and I am so fond of you both—do let me stay."

"Whisht, whisht, my dearie," returned Mrs. Duncan, wiping her own eyes and Fay's. "Of course you shall bide with me; would either Donald or I turn out the shorn lamb to face the tempest? Married, my bairn; why, you look only fit for a cot yourself; and with a bairn of your own, too. And to think that any man could ill-use a creature like that," half to herself; but Fay drooped her head as she heard her. Mrs. Duncan thought Hugh was cruel to her, and that she had fled from his ill-treatment, and she dare not contradict this notion.

"You must never speak to me of my husband," continued Fay, with an agitation that still further misled Mrs. Duncan. "I should have died if I had stopped with him; but I ran away, and I knew he would never find me here. I have money enough,—ah, plenty,—so you will not be put to expense. You may take care of my purse; and I have more—a great

deal more;" and Fay held out to the dazzled eyes of the old lady a purse full of bank notes and glittering gold pieces, which seemed riches itself to her Highland simplicity.

"Ay, and just look at the diamonds and emeralds on your fingers, my dearie; your man must have plenty of this world's goods. What do they call him, my bairn, and where does he live?" But Fay skilfully fenced these questions. She called herself Mrs. St. Clair, she said, and her husband was a landed proprietor, and lived in one of the midland counties in England; and then she turned Mrs. Duncan's attention by asking if she and baby might have the room her father slept in. Then Jean brought in the tea and buttered scones, and the milk for the baby; and while Mrs. Duncan fed him, she told Fay about her own trouble.

For the kind, white-headed minister, whom Fay remembered, was lying now in his last illness; he had had two strokes of paralysis, and the third would carry him off, the doctor said.

"One blessing is, my Donald does not suffer," continued Mrs. Duncan, with a quiver of her lip; "he is quite helpless, poor man, and cannot stir himself, and Jean lifts him up as though he were a baby; but he sleeps most of his time, and when he is awake he never troubles—he just talks about the old time, when he brought me first to the Manse; and sometimes he fancies Robbie and Elsie are pulling flowers in the garden—and no doubt they are, the darlings, only it is in the garden of Paradise; and maybe there are plenty of roses and lilies there, such as Solomon talked about in the Canticles."

"And who takes the duty for Mr. Duncan?" asked Fay, who was much distressed to hear this account of her kind old friend.

"Well, our nephew, Fergus, rides over from Corrie to take the services for the Sabbath. He is to be wedded to Lilian Graham, down at the farm yonder, and sometimes he puts up at the Manse and sometimes at the farm; and they do say, when my Donald has gone to the land of the leal, that Fergus will

come to the Manse; for though he is young he is a powerful preacher, and even St. Paul bids Timothy to 'let no one despise his youth;' but I am wearying you, my bairn, and Jean has kindled a fire in the pink room, for the nights are chilly, and you and me will be going up, and leaving the big doggie to take care of himself."

But "the big doggie" was of a different opinion; he quite approved of his hostess, but it was against his principles to allow his mistress to go out of his sight. Things were on a different footing now; and, ever since they had left Redmond Hall, Nero considered himself responsible for the safety of his two charges; so he quietly followed them into the pleasant low-ceiled bedroom, with its window looking over the old-fashioned garden and orchard, and laid himself down with his nose between his paws, watching Jean fill the baby's bath, to the edification of the two women.

Jean helped Fay unpack a few necessary articles, and then she went down to warm the porridge for her master's supper; but Mrs. Duncan pinned up her grey stuff gown, and sat down by the fire to undress the baby, while Fay languidly got ready for bed.

It was well that the mother and child had fallen into the hands of these good Samaritans. In spite of her wretchedness and the strange weight that lay so heavy on her young heart, a sort of hazy comfort stole over Fay as she lay between the coarse lavender-scented sheets, and listened to her baby's coos as he stretched his little limbs in the warm firelight.

"Ay, he is as fine and hearty as our Robbie was," observed Mrs. Duncan, with a sigh; and so she prattled on, now praising the baby's beauty, and now commenting on the fineness of his cambric shirts, and the value of the lace that trimmed his night-dress, until Fay fell asleep, and thought she was listening to a little brook that had overflowed its banks, and was running down a stony hillside.

She hardly woke up when Mrs. Duncan placed the baby in

her arms, and left them with a murmured benediction, and went down for a gossip with Jean. "And a lovelier sight my old eyes never saw," she said, "than that young creature, who looks only a child herself, with the bonnie boy in her arms, and her golden-brown hair covering them both. 'Deed, Jean, the man must have an evil spirit in him to ill-treat a little angel like that. But we will keep her safe, my woman, as sure as my name is Jeanie Duncan;" and to this Jean agreed. They were both innocent unsophisticated women who knew nothing of the world's ways, and, as Mrs. Duncan had said, "they would as soon have turned a shorn lamb away, and left it exposed to the tempest," as shut their door against Fay and her child.

Fay was not able to rise from the bed the next day; indeed for more than a week she was almost as helpless as a baby, and had to submit to a great deal of nursing.

Mrs. Duncan was quite in her element—petting her guest, and ordering Jean about; for she was a brisk, bustling little woman, and far more active than her threescore-and-ten years warranted.

It was a delight to her motherly nature to dress and undress Fay's bonnie boy. She would prose for hours about Robbie and Elsie as she sat beside the homely cradle that had once held her own children, while Fay listened languidly. It was all she could do to lie there and sleep and eat. Perhaps it was bodily exhaustion, but a sort of lull had come to her. She ceased to fret, and only wondered dreamily if Hugh were very pleased to get rid of her, and what he was doing, and who dusted and arranged his papers for him now she was no longer there. But of course Mrs. Heron would see to that.

Jean had plenty of work on her hands, but she never grumbled. There was the baby's washing and extra cooking, and the care of her old master. But in spite of her hard work, she often contrived to find her way to the pink room; for Jean worshipped babies, and it was a proud moment when she could get the boy in her arms and carry him out for a breath of air.

Mrs. Duncan told Fay that she had had great difficulty in making her husband understand the facts of the case. "His brain was just a wee bit clouded to every-day matters," she said; but he knew that he had guests at the Manse, and had charged his wife to show every hospitality.

"There is a deal said about the virtue of hospitality in the Bible," he continued. "There was Abraham and the fatted calf; and the good widows in the apostles' time who washed the feet of strangers; and some have entertained angels unaware; and it shall never be said of us, Jeanie woman, that we turned anybody from the Manse."

Fay went to see the old man when she was strong enough to leave her room, which was not for a fortnight after her arrival.

She found him lying on one side of the big bed with brown moreen hangings that she remembered so well, with his white head pillowed high, and his fine old face turned to the setting sun.

He looked at her with a placid smile as she stood beside him—a small girlish figure, now sadly frail and drooping, with her boy in her arms—and held out his left hand—the right arm was helpless.

"Mother and child," he murmured; "it is always before our eyes, the Divine picture; and old and young, it touches the manhood within us. So you have come to bide a wee with Jeanie and me in the old Manse, my dear young lady; ay, and you are kindly welcome. And folks do say that there is no air so fine as ours, and no milk so pure as our brindled cow gives, and may be it will give you a little colour into your cheeks."

"Don't you remember me, Mr. Duncan?" asked Fay, somewhat disappointed to find herself treated like an ordinary visitor. "Don't you remember Fay Mordaunt, the little girl who used to play with you in the orchard? but I am afraid I was older than I looked."

"Elsie used to play with me in the orchard," replied the old man, wistfully; "but Jeanie says she, has gone to Heaven with wee Robbie. Nay, I never remember names, except Jeanie—and may be Jean comes handy. And there is one I never forget—the name of my Lord Jesus;" and he bowed his old head reverently.

"Come away, my bairn; Donald will have plenty to say to you another time," said Mrs. Duncan, kindly. "He is a bit drowsy now, and he is apt to wander at such times." But the minister heard her, and a sort of holy smile lit up his rugged face.

"Ay, but He'll not let me wander far; I have always got a grip of His hand, and if my old feet stumble a bit I'm just lifted up. No, I could not forget His name, which is just Love, and nothing else. But perhaps you are right, Jeanie, lass, and I am a bit sleepy. Take both the bairns away, and watch over them as though they were lambs of the fold—and so they are lambs of His fold," finished the old man. "And may be the Shepherd found them straying, poor bit creatures, and sent them here for you and me to mind, my woman."

CHAPTER XXXIV

TRACKED AT LAST

"Thus it was granted me
To know that he loved me to the depth and height
Of such large natures; ever competent,
With grand horizons by the sea or land,
To love's grand sunrise."

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

It was at the close of a lovely September day that Raby Ferrers sat alone in the piazza of a large fashionable boarding-house in W——. This favourite American watering-place was, as usual, thronged by visitors, who came either to seek relief for various ailments from the far-famed hot springs, or to enjoy the salubrious air and splendid scenery that made W—— so notorious.

The piazza was always the favourite lounge at all hours of the day, but especially towards evening. A handsome striped awning, and the natural shade of the splendid tropical plants that twined round the slender pillars, gave a pleasant shade even at noonday. Broad low steps led to the gardens, and deck-chairs and cushioned rocking-chairs were placed invitingly at intervals.

A gay bevy of girls had just taken possession of these coveted seats, and were chattering with the young men who had just followed them out of the hot dining-room; but no one invaded the quiet corner where the English clergyman had established himself, though many a pair of laughing eyes grew a little sad and wistful when they rested on the grave, abstracted face of the blind man.

"He looks so dull," observed one girl—a fair delicate blonde, who was evidently the belle, for she was surrounded by at least half a dozen young men. "I have half a mind to go and speak to him myself, only you would all be watching me."

"Miss Bellagrove cannot fail to be the cynosure of all eyes," returned a beardless dapper young man with the unmistakable Yankee accent; but to this remark Miss Bellagrove merely turned a cold shoulder.

"His sister has been away most of the afternoon," she continued, addressing a good-looking young officer who held her fan. "It was so clever of you to find out that she was his sister, Captain Maudsley. I had quite made up my mind they were married; yes, of course, every one must notice the likeness between them, but then they might have been cousins, and she does seem so devoted to him." But here a whispered admonition in her ear made Miss Bellagrove break off her sentence rather abruptly, as at that moment Miss Ferrers' tall figure, in the usual grey gown, was seen crossing one of the little lawns towards the piazza.

"She is wonderfully distinguished looking," was Miss Bellagrove's next remark. "Most Englishwomen are tall, I do believe; don't you think her face beautiful, Captain Maudsley;" but the reply to this made Miss Bellagrove change colour very prettily. Raby was profoundly oblivious of the interest he was exciting; he was wondering what had detained Margaret all these hours, and if she would have any news to bring him.

As yet their journey had been fruitless. They had reached New York just as Miss Campion and her companion had quitted it; they had followed on their track—but had always arrived either a day or an hour too late. Now and then they had to wait until a letter from Fern gave them more decided particulars. Occasionally they made a mistake, and found that Miss Campion had changed her plans. Once they were in the same train, and Margaret never found it out until she saw Crystal leave the carriage, and then there was no time to

follow her. Margaret shed tears of disappointment, and blamed herself for her own blindness; but Raby never reproached her.

He was growing heart-sick and weary by this time. They had spent six weeks in this search, and were as far from success as ever—no wonder Raby's face looked grave and overcast as he sat alone in the piazza. Even Margaret's protracted absence raised no sanguine expectation in his mind; on the contrary, as his practised ear recognised her footstep, he breathed a short prayer for patience.

"Dear Raby," she said, softly, as she took a seat beside him and unfastened the clasps of her long cloak; "I have been away a longer time than usual; have you been wanting me?"

"Oh no," with a faint smile; "Fergusson took care of me at dinner, and I had a pleasant American widow on the other side, who amused me very much—she told me some capital stories about the Canadian settlers; so, on the whole, I did very well. I begin to like Fergusson immensely; he is a little broad, but still very sensible in his views. He comes from Cumberland, he tells me, and has rather a large cure of souls."

"Yes, dear,"—but Margaret spoke absently,—"but you do not ask me what I have been doing, Raby."

"No,"—very slowly; and then, with a touch of sadness, "I begin to think it is better not to ask."

"Poor fellow,"—laying her hand on his arm caressingly. "Yes, I understand you are beginning to lose hope. What did I tell you last night—that it is always the darkest the hour before dawn. Do you remember how fond Crystal was of that song? Well, it is true, Raby; I have been stopping away for some purpose this afternoon. Crystal and Miss Campion are here."

"Here!" and at Raby's exclamation more than one head turned in the direction of the brother and sister.

"Yes, in W——. Do not speak so loud, Raby; you are making people look at us. Take my arm, and we will go into the shrubberies; no one will disturb us there." And as she

guided him down the steps, and then across a secluded lawn, Raby did not speak again until the scent of the flowering shrubs told him they had entered one of the quiet paths leading away from the house.

"Now, tell me, Maggie," he said, quickly; and Margaret obeyed at once.

"I was at the station, as we planned, and saw them arrive; so for once the information was correct. Crystal got out first, and went in search of the luggage. I concealed myself behind a bale of goods—wool-packs, I believe—and she passed me quite closely; I could have touched her with my hand. She looked very well, only thinner, and I think older; it struck me she had grown, too, for she certainly looked taller."

"It is possible; and you really saw her face, Margaret?"

"Yes; she was looking away. She is as beautiful as ever, Raby. No wonder people stare at her so. She is as much like your ideal Esther as she used to be, only there is a grander look about her altogether—less like the girl, and more of the woman."

"Ah, she has suffered so; we have all aged, Maggie. She will think us both changed."

Margaret suppressed a sigh—she was almost thankful that Raby's blind eyes could not see the difference in her. He was quite unconscious that her youthful bloom had faded, and that her fair face had a settled, matured look that seldom comes before middle age; and she was glad that this was so. Neither of them spoke now of the strange blight that had passed over her young life. Margaret had long ceased to weep over it; it was her cross she said, and she had learnt its weight by this time.

"Well, Margaret?" for she had paused for a moment.

"I did not dare to leave my place of concealment until she had passed. I saw Miss Campion join her. She is a pleasant brisk-looking woman with grey hair, and rather a young face. I followed them out of the station, and heard them order the driver to bring them here."

"Here! To this house, Margaret?"

"Yes—wait a moment—but of course I knew what Mrs. O'Brien would say—that there was no room; so I did not trouble to follow them very closely; in fact, I knew it would be useless when I did arrive. I went straight to Mrs. O'Brien's parlour, and asked if she had managed to accommodate the two ladies."

"'I did not know they were friends of yours, Miss Ferrers,' she said, regretfully. 'But what could I do? There is not a vacant bed in the house, and I knew the hotel would be just as full; so I sent them down to Mrs. Maddox at the corner house, down yonder—it is only a stone's throw from here. And, as I told the ladies, they can join us at luncheon and dinner, and make use of the drawing-room. I knew Mrs. Maddox had her two best bedrooms and the front parlour empty.' Of course I thanked Mrs. O'Brien, and said no doubt this would do excellently for our friends; and then I walked past the corner house and found they were carrying in the luggage, and Miss Campion was standing at the door talking to a coloured servant."

"You actually passed the house? Oh, Margaret, how imprudent. Supposing Crystal had seen you from the window?"

"Oh, my cloak and veil disguised me; besides, there is a long strip of garden between the house and the road. I could hardly distinguish Crystal, though I could see there was some one in the parlour. And now, what are we to do, Raby? It will never do to risk a meeting at *table d'hôte;* in a crowded room, Crystal might see us, and make her escape before I could manage to intercept her; and yet, how are we to intrude on Miss Campion? it will be dreadfully awkward for us all."

"I must think over it," he answered, quickly. "It is growing dark now, Margaret, is it not?"

"Yes, dear, do you feel chilly—shall we go in?"

"No, I want you to take me farther; there is a gate leading to the road, is there not. I should like to go past the house; it

will make it seem more real, Maggie, and you shall describe exactly how it is situated."

Margaret complied at once—not for worlds would she have hinted that she was already nearly spent with fatigue and want of food. Cathy, the bright little Mulatto chambermaid, would get her a cup of tea and a sandwich presently. Raby's lover-like wish must be indulged; he wanted to pass the house that held his treasure.

It was bright moonlight by this time, and the piazza had been long deserted. The shadows were dark under the avenue, for the road was thickly planted with trees. Just as they were nearing the corner house—a low white building, with a verandah running round it—Margaret drew Raby somewhat hastily behind a tall maple, for her keen eyes had caught sight of two figures standing by the gate. As the moon emerged from behind a cloud, she saw Crystal plainly; Miss Campion was beside her with a black veil thrown over her grey hair.

Margaret's whispered "hush!" was a sufficient hint to Raby, and he stood motionless. The next moment the voice that was dearer to him than any other sounded close beside him—at least it seemed so in the clear resonant atmosphere.

"What a delicious night; how white that patch of moon-lighted road looks where the trees do not cast their shadows so heavily. I like this quiet road. I am quite glad the boarding-house was full; I think the cottage is much cosier."

"Cosier, yes," laughed the other; "but that is a speech that ought to have come out of my middle-aged lips. What an odd girl you are, Crystal; you never seem to care for mixing with young people; and yet it is only natural at your age. You are a terrible misanthrope. I do believe you would rather not dine at the *table d'hôte*, only you are ashamed to say so."

"I have no right to inflict my misanthropy on you, dear Miss Campion; as it is, you are far too indulgent to my morose moods."

"Morose fiddlesticks," was the energetic reply. "But there, I do like young people to enjoy themselves like young people.

Why, if I had your youth and good looks; well,"—with a change of tone sufficiently explicit,—"it is no use trying to make you conceited; and yet that handsome young American—wasn't he a colonel?—tried to make himself as pleasant as he could."

"Did he?" was the somewhat indifferent answer; at which Miss Campion shook her head in an exasperated way.

"Oh, it is no use talking to you;" with good-natured impatience. "English or American; old, ugly, or handsome; they are all the same to you; and of course, by the natural laws of contradiction, the absurd creatures are all bent on making you fall in love with them. Now that colonel, Crystal, I can't think what fault you could find with him; he was manly, gentlemanly, and as good-looking as a man ought to be."

"I do not care for good-looking men."

"Or for plain ones either, my dear. I expect you are romantic, Crystal, and have an ideal of your own."

"And if I answer, yes," returned the girl, quickly, "will you leave off teasing me about all those stupid men? If you knew how I hate it—how I despise them all."

"All but the ideal," observed Miss Campion, archly; but she took the girl's hand in hers, and her shrewd, clever face softened. "You must forgive an impertinent old maid, my dear. Perhaps she had her story too, who knows. And so you have your ideal, my poor, dear child; and the ideal has not made you a happy woman. It never does," in a low voice.

"Dear Miss Campion," returned Crystal, with a blush; "if I am unhappy, it is only through my own fault; no one else is to blame, and—and—it is not as you think. It is true I once knew a good man, who has made every other man seem puny and insignificant beside him; but that is because he was so good, and there was no other reason."

"No other reason, except your love for him," observed the elder woman, stroking her hand gently. "I have long suspected this, my dear."

"Oh, you must not talk so," answered Crystal, in a tone of

poignant distress; "you do not know; you cannot understand. Oh, it is all so sad. I owe him everything. My ideal, oh yes; whom have I ever seen who could compare with him—so strong, so gentle, so forgiving? Oh, you must never let me talk of him; it breaks my heart."

"Come away, Margaret," whispered Raby, hoarsely, in her ear. "I have no right to hear this; it is betraying my darling's confidence. Take me away, for I cannot trust myself another moment; and it is late—too late to speak to her to-night."

"Hush! they are going in; we must wait a moment. Crystal is crying, and that kind creature is comforting her. We did not mean to listen, Raby; but it was not safe to move away from the trees."

"You heard what she said, Margaret—her ideal. Heaven bless her sweet innocence; she is as much a child as ever. Do I look like any woman's ideal now, Margaret. I always think of those lines in *Aurora Leigh*, when I imagine myself

> "'A mere bare blind stone in the blaze of day,
> A man, upon the outside of the earth,
> As dark as ten feet under, in the grave,—
> Why that seemed hard.'

And yet, she really said it; her ideal. Ah, well! A woman's pity sometimes makes her mad. What do you say, Maggie?"

"That you are, and that you ever have been, Crystal's ideal." And after that they walked back in silence.

"You and I will go again to-morrow morning," Raby said to her as they parted for the night; and Margaret assented.

Raby had a wakeful night, and slept a little heavily towards morning.

Margaret had already finished her breakfast when he entered the long dining-room, and one of the black waiters guided him to his place. Raby wondered that she did not join him as usual to read his letters to him, and make plans for their visit; but a few minutes later she joined him in walking dress, and sat down beside him.

"Have you finished your breakfast, Raby?" And, as he answered in the affirmative, she continued, with a little thrill of excitement in her sweet voice,—"Miss Campion has gone down to the springs—I saw her pass alone. Crystal is writing letters in the parlour—I saw her. Shall we come, my dear brother."

Need she have put the question. Even Charles, the head waiter, looked at Mr. Ferrers as he walked down the long room with his head erect. A grand-looking Englishman, he thought and who would have imagined he was blind. Margaret could hardly keep up with the long even strides that brought them so quickly to the corner house; at the gate she checked him gently.

"We must be quiet, Raby—very quiet—or she will hear our footsteps. She is sitting with her back to the parlour door—I can see her plainly. Tread on this grassy border." And as Raby followed her directions implicitly, restraining his impatience with difficulty, they were soon standing in the porch. The door stood open for coolness, and the little square hall, with its Indian matting and rocking-chairs, looked very inviting. Margaret whispered that the parlour door was open too, and that they must not startle the girl too much; and then, still guiding him, she led him into the parlour and quietly called Crystal.

"We are here, dear Crystal." And as Crystal turned her head and saw Margaret's sweet, loving face, and Raby standing a little behind her, she sprung from her chair with a half-stifled scream. But before she could speak, or Margaret either, Raby was beside her; and in another moment his arms were round her, and his sightless face bent over her. "Hush, darling, I have you safely now; I will never let you go again," Margaret heard him say as she left the room, quietly closing the door behind her. Her turn would come presently, she said to herself; but now she must leave them together.

CHAPTER XXXV

RABY'S WIFE

"Yet, in one respect,
Just one, beloved, I am in no wise changed;
I love you, loved you, loved you first and last,
And love you on for ever, now I know
I loved you always."

E. B. BROWNING.

CRYSTAL never moved as she heard the sound of the closing door. Only once she tried to cower away from him, but he would not release his hold; and, as his strength and purpose made themselves felt, she stood there dumb and cold, until, suddenly overcome by his tenderness, she laid her head on his breast with a sob that seemed to shake her girlish frame.

"Raby, Raby! oh, I cannot bear this." Then in a tone of anguish, "I do not deserve it."

"No," he said, calmly, and trying to soothe her with grave kisses; "you have been a faithless child, and deserve to be punished. How do you propose to make me amends for all the sorrow you have caused me?"

"Oh, if I could only die," she answered bitterly; "if my death could only do you good. Raby, the trouble of it has nearly killed me; you must not, you must not speak so kindly to me."

"Must I not, my darling; how does a man generally speak to his future wife?" and as she trembled and shrank from him, he went on in the same quiet voice, "if you are so ready to die for me, you will not surely refuse to live for me. Do you

think you owe me nothing for all these years of desertion, Crystal; was there any reason that, because of that unhappy accident,—a momentary childish passion, you should break my heart by your desertion?"

"I could not stay," she answered, weeping bitterly; "I could not stay to see the ruin I had made. Oh, Raby, let me go, do not forgive me; I have been your curse, and Margaret's too!"

"Then come back and be our blessing; come back in your beauty and youth to be eyes to the blind man, and to be his darling and delight. Crystal, I am wiser now—I shall make no more mistakes; indeed, I always loved you, dear; poor Mona was no more to me than any other woman."

"You loved me, Raby?"

"Yes, most truly and deeply; but you were so young, my sweet; and I did not think it right to fetter your inexperienced youth—you were so unconscious of your own rare beauty; you had seen so few men. 'Let her go out into the world,' I said, and test her power and influence. I will not ask her to be my wife yet. How could I know you would never change, Crystal—that your heart was really mine?"

"It has always been yours," she murmured; but, alas! those sweet blushes were lost on her blind lover.

"Yes, I know it now; Margaret has helped me to understand things. I know now, you poor child, that you looked upon Mona as your rival; that you thought I was false to you; that in my ignorance I made you endure tortures. It is I who ought to ask your pardon, love, for all I made you suffer."

"No, no."

"We must both be wiser for the future. Now put your hand in mine, Crystal, and tell me that you are content to take the blind man for your husband, that the thought of a long life beside him does not frighten you; that you really love me well enough to be my wife;" and, as he turned his sightless face towards her, Crystal raised herself and kissed his blind eyes softly. "'She loved much,' she whispered, 'because much

had been forgiven her.' Oh, how true that is; I deserve only to be hated, and you follow me across the world to ask me to be your wife. Your love has conquered, Raby; from this day your will shall be mine."

* * * * *

Miss Campion had passed a long morning at the springs, wandering about the pleasant grounds with an American friend. Crystal would have finished her letter to Fern Trafford long ago, she thought, as she walked quickly down the hot road, and would be waiting for luncheon. She was not a little surprised then when, on reaching the cottage, she heard the sound of voices, and found herself confronting a very tall man in clerical dress, whose head seemed almost to touch the low ceiling, while a sweet-looking woman, in a long grey cloak and Quakerish bonnet, was standing holding Crystal's hand.

"Dear Miss Campion," exclaimed Crystal, with a vivid blush that seemed to give her new beauty, "some English friends of mine have just arrived. Mr. Ferrers and his sister." But Raby's deep voice interrupted her.

"Crystal is not introducing us properly; she does not mention the fact that she is engaged to me, and that my sister is her cousin; so it is necessary for me to explain matters."

"Is this true, child?" asked Miss Campion in a startled voice; and, as though Crystal's face were sufficient answer, she continued archly, "Do you mean that this is 'he,' Crystal—the ideal we were talking about last night in the moonlight."

"Oh, hush!" returned Crystal, much confused at this, for she knew by this time that there had been silent auditors to that girlish outburst. But Raby's hand pressed hers meaningly.

"I am afraid I must plead guilty to being that 'he,' Miss Campion. I believe, if the truth must be told, that Crystal has been engaged to me from a child. I know she was only nine years old when she made me an offer—at least she informed me in the presence of my father and sister that she meant to belong to me."

"Oh, Margaret, do ask him to be quiet," whispered Crystal; but her glowing, happy face showed no displeasure. Something like tears glistened in Miss Campion's shrewd eyes as she kissed her and shook hands with Mr. Ferrers.

"It is not often the ideal turns up at the right moment," she said, bluntly; "but I am very glad you have come to make Crystal look like other girls. Now, Miss Ferrers, as only lovers can feed on air, I propose that we go in search of luncheon, for the gong has sounded long ago;" and as even Raby allowed that this was sensible advice, they all adjourned to the boarding-house.

The occupants of the piazza were sorely puzzled that evening. and Miss Bellagrove was a trifle cross. Captain Maudsley had been raving about the beauty of the wonderful brunette who was sitting opposite to him at dinner. "She must be an Italian," he had said to Miss Bellagrove, who received his confidence somewhat sulkily; "one never sees those wonderful eyes and that tint of hair out of Italy or Spain. Tanqueville, who is an artist, is wild about her, because he says he has never seen a face with a purer oval. He wants to paint her for his Rebecca at the Well. It is rather hard lines she should be engaged to a blind clergyman," finished Captain Maudsley, rather incautiously. Miss Bellagrove's fair face wore an uneasy expression. "How do you know they are engaged?" she said, impatiently; "I do not believe they are. Miss Ferrers does not wear any ring."

"Nevertheless, I should not mind betting a few dozens of gloves that they are," replied Captain Maudsley, with a keen, mischievous glance that rather disconcerted Miss Bellagrove. He was quite aware that he was teasing the poor little girl; but then she deserved punishment for flirting with that ass Rogers all last evening. Jack Maudsley was honestly in love with the fair-haired beauty, but he had plenty of pluck and spirit, and would not be fooled if he could help it. Perhaps Miss Bellagrove, in common with the rest of her sex, liked a lover to be a

little masterful. It was certain that she was on her best behaviour during the rest of the evening, and snubbed Mr. Rogers most decidedly when he invited her to take a turn in the shrubberies.

Crystal attracted a great deal of notice in the boarding-house, but she gave no one any opportunity of addressing her. Raby was always beside her, and she seemed completely engrossed with his attentions. As Miss Campion observed to Margaret, she might as well look for another companion for all the good Crystal was to her.

But one evening Margaret found Crystal sitting alone in a corner of the large drawing-room. Most of the company had gone into the tea-room, but one or two, Raby among them, were lingering in the garden. Raby was talking rather earnestly to Miss Campion.

"Alone, Crystal!" sitting down beside her with a smile. "Do you mean that Raby has actually left you." But Crystal's face wore no answering smile—she looked a little disturbed.

"I asked him to go and let me think it over. I cannot make up my mind, Margaret. Raby wants me to marry him at once, before we go back to England; he will have it that it will be better for me to go back to the Grange as his wife."

"Yes, darling, I know Raby wishes this, and I hope you mean to consent."

"I—I do not know what to say—the idea somehow frightens me. It is all so quick and sudden—next week; will not people think it strange. A quiet English wedding in the dear little Sandycliffe church seems to me so much nicer. But Raby seems to dread the waiting so, Margaret," and here her eyes filled with tears. "I think he does not trust me—that he is afraid I may leave him again; and the idea pains me."

"No, dearest," returned Margaret, soothingly; "I am sure such a thought never entered Raby's head; but he has suffered so, and I think all the trouble, and his blindness, make him nervous; he was saying so last night, and accusing himself of

selfishness, but he owned that he could not control a nervous dread that something might happen to separate you both, Crystal," looking at her wistfully. "Is the idea of an immediate marriage so repugnant; if not, I wish you would give way in this."

Crystal looked up, startled by her earnestness, and then she said with sweet humility, "It is only that I feel so unworthy of all this happiness; but if you and Raby think it best, I will be guided by you. Will you tell him so? but no, there he is alone; I will go to him myself."

Raby heard her coming, and held out his hand with a smile.

"You see I never mistake your footsteps," he said, in the tone he kept for her ear; "I should distinguish them in a crowd. Well darling?" waiting for the word he knew would follow.

"Margaret has been talking to me, and I see she approves —it shall be next week if you wish it, Raby; that is, if Miss Campion will spare me."

"She will gladly do so, especially as Margaret offers to keep her company for a fortnight; after that we will all go back in the same steamer. Thanks, my darling, for consenting; you have made me very happy. I knew you would not refuse," lifting the little hand to his lips.

"I feel as though I have no power to refuse you anything," was her loving answer; "but I know it is all your thought for me, Raby," pressing closer to him in the empty dusk, for there were no curious eyes upon them—only night-moths wheeling round them. "Are you never afraid of what you are doing; do you not fear that I may disappoint you?"

"No," he answered, calmly, "I fear nothing."

"Not my unhappy temper?" she whispered; and he could feel the slight figure trembling as she put the question.

"No," in the same quiet tones that always soothed her agitation, "for I believe the evil spirit is exorcised by much

prayer and fasting; and, darling, even if it should not be so, I should not be afraid then, for I know better how to deal with it and you; no angry spirit could live in my arms, and I would exorcise it thus"—touching her lips. "No, have faith in me, as I have faith in you, and all will be well." And so he comforted her.

There was a great sensation in the boarding-house at W—— when news of the approaching wedding was made known. Captain Maudsley triumphed openly over Miss Bellagrove. "I told you the Italian beauty was engaged to the blind Englishman," he said to her; "but after all, she is only half an Italian—her mother was a Florentine, and her father was English. Fergusson told me all about it—he is to marry them; and old Dr. Egan is to give her away. There is some romantic story belonging to them. I think he has been in love with her from a child. Well, Heaven gives nuts to those who have no teeth," grumbled the young officer, thinking of the bridegroom's blindness.

Crystal remained very quietly in the corner house during the rest of the week. Raby spent most of his time with her. On the eve of her wedding she wrote a little note to Fern, telling her of her intended marriage.

"I am very happy," she wrote; "but there are some kinds of happiness too deep for utterance. When I think of the new life that awaits me to-morrow, an overwhelming sense of unworthiness seems to crush me to the ground; to think that I shall be Raby's wife—that I shall be permitted to dedicate my whole life to his dear service. I have told you a little about him, but you will never know what he is really; I sometimes pray that my love may not be idolatry. When he brings me to the Grange—that dear home of my childhood, you must come to me, and your mother also. Raby says he loves you both for your goodness to me; he has promised that you shall be our first guests.

"Do you know our dear Margaret will not be long with us?

She intends to join a community in the East End of London, and to devote herself for the remainder of her life to the service of the poor. I could not help crying a little when she told me this; but she only smiled and said that she was not unhappy. And yet she loved Hugh Redmond. I talked to Raby afterwards, and he comforted me a little. He said that though Hugh loved her with the whole strength of his nature, that he could never really have satisfied a woman like Margaret—that in time she must have found out that he was no true mate for her. 'A woman should never be superior to her husband,' he said. 'Margaret's grand intellect and powers of influence would have been wasted if she had become Hugh Redmond's wife. Oh yes, he would have been good to her—probably he would have worshipped her; but one side of her nature would have been a mystery to him. You must not grieve for her, my child, for she has ceased to grieve for herself; the Divine Providence has withheld from her a woman's natural joys of wifehood and maternity, but a noble work is to be given to her; our Margaret, please God, will be a mother in Israel.' And, indeed, I feel Raby is right, and that Margaret is one of God's dear saints."

It was on a golden September day that Crystal became Raby Ferrers' wife; the company that had grouped themselves in the long drawing-room of the boarding-house owned that they had never seen a grander bride.

The creamy Indian silk fell in graceful folds on the tall supple figure; the beautiful head, with its coils of dark glossy hair, was bent in girlish timidity. Margaret had clasped round her white throat the pearl necklace and diamond cross that had belonged to her mother, and which she was to have worn at her own bridal. "I shall not need it; it is for Raby's wife," she said, as Crystal protested with tears in her eyes; "it must be your only ornament. Oh, if Raby could only see how lovely you look."

But the calm tranquil content on the sightless face silenced

even this wish. Crystal ceased to tremble when the deep vibrating voice, vowing to love and cherish her to her life's end, sounded in her ears; but Raby felt the coldness of the hand he held.

When they had received the congratulations of their friends, and Margaret had tenderly embraced her new sister, and they were left alone for a little, Raby drew his young bride closer to him.

"You are not afraid now, my darling?"

"No," she answered, unsteadily; "but it is all so like a dream. A fortnight ago—only a fortnight—I was the most desolate creature in God's earth; and now——"

"And now," echoing her words with a kiss, "you are my wife. Ah, do you remember your childish speech—it used to ring in my ears; 'I am going to belong to Raby all my life long; I will never leave him, never.' Well it has come true, love; you are mine now."

"Yes," she whispered, leaning her forehead against him, "you will never be able to get rid of me; and oh,"—her voice trembling,—"the rest of knowing that it will never be my duty to leave you."

He laughed at that, but something glistened in his eyes too. "No, my wild bird; no more flights for you—I have you safely now; you are bound to me by this"—touching the little circlet of gold upon the slender finger. "Now, my darling—my wife of an hour, I want you to make me a promise; I ask it of your love, Crystal. If a shadow—even the very faintest shadow, cross your spirit; if one accusing thought seems to stand between your soul and mine; one doubt or fear that, like the cloud no bigger than a man's hand, might rise and spread into the blackness of tempest, will you come and tell it to me?"

"Oh, Raby, do not ask me."

"But I do ask it, love, and I ask it in my two-fold character of priest and husband, and it is the first request your husband

makes you. Come, do not hesitate. You have given me yourself; now, with sweet generosity, promise me this, that you will share with me every doubt and fear that disturbs you?"

"Will you not let me try to conquer the feeling alone first, and then come to you?"

"No, I would not undertake the responsibility; I know you too well, darling. Come, I thought you promised something that sounded like obedience just now."

"Ah, you are laughing at me. But this is no light matter, Raby; it means that I am to burthen you with all my foolish doubts and fancies—that I am never to keep my wrong feelings to myself."

"Promise!" was his only answer, in a very persuasive voice.

"Yes, I will promise," hiding her face on his shoulder; "but it will be your own fault if I am ever a trouble to you. Oh, Raby, may I always tell you everything; will you help me to be good, and to fight against myself?"

"We will help each other," he answered, stroking her soft hair; "there shall never be a shadow on the one that the other will not share—half the shadow and half the sunshine; and always the Divine goodness over us. That shall be our married life, Crystal."

CHAPTER XXXVI

SIR HUGH'S REPENTANCE

"And by comparison I see
The majesty of matron grace,
And learn how pure, how fair can be
My own wife's face:

Pure with all faithful passion, fair
With tender smiles that come and go,
And comforting as April air
After the snow."

JEAN INGELOW.

SIR HUGH began to wish that he had never gone to Egypt, or that he had gone with any one but Fitzclarence—he was growing weary of his vagaries and unpunctuality. They had deviated already four times from the proposed route, and the consequence was, he had missed all his letters; and the absence of home news was making him seriously uneasy. He was the only married man; the rest of the party consisted of gay, young bachelors—good enough fellows in their way, but utterly careless. They laughed at Sir Hugh's anxious scruples, and secretly voted that a married man was rather a bore in this kind of thing. What was the use of bothering about letters, they said, so long as the remittances came to hand safely?

Sir Hugh thought of Fay's loving little letters lying neglected at the different postal towns, and sighed; either he was not so indifferent to her as he supposed himself to be, or absence was making his heart tender; but he had never been so full of care and thought for his Wee Wifie as he was then. He

wished he had bidden her good-bye. He remembered the last time he had seen her, when he had gone into his study with the telegram in his hand; and then he recalled the strange wistful look she had given him. He could not tell why the fancy should haunt him, but he wished so much that he had seen her again and taken a kinder leave of her. It had not been his fault, he told himself a hundred times over; but still one never knew what might happen. He wished now that he had taken her in his arms and had said God bless her; she was such a child, and he was leaving her for a long time.

Sir Hugh was becoming a wiser man, and was beginning to acknowledge his faults, and, what was better still, to try and make amends for them.

It was too late to undo the effects of Fitzclarence's reckless mode of travelling, but he would do all he could; so in his leisure moments, when the other men were smoking and chatting in their tent, he sat down in a quiet corner and wrote several letters, full of descriptions of their journey, to amuse Fay in her solitude; and one Sunday, when the others had started on an expedition to see some ruin, he wrote the explanation that he had deferred so long. Hugh was an honest, well-meaning man, in spite of his moral weakness; if that letter had only reached the young wife's eyes it would have healed her sore heart and kept her beside him.

For he told her everything; and he told it in such a frank, manly way, that no woman could have lost confidence in him, though she read what Fay was to have read in the first few lines—that he had not married her for love. Hugh owned his unhappy passion for Margaret, and pleaded his great trouble as the excuse for his restlessness. He had gone away, he said, that he might fight a battle with himself, and return home a better man; it would all be different when he came back, for he meant to be a good husband to her, and to live for her and the boy, and to make her happy, and by and by he would be happy too. And he ended his letter as he never ended one

yet, by assuring her that he was her loving husband. But, alas, when that tardy explanation reached the cottage at Daintree, Aunt Griselda only wrung her thin white hands and cried, for no one knew what had become of Fay, and Erle was rushing about and sending telegrams in all directions, and Fay, with the shadow always on her sweet face, was sitting in the orchard of the Manse, under the shade of the mossy old apple-trees, and baby Hugh lay on her lap, gurgling to the birds and the white clouds that sailed over their heads. When Sir Hugh had written that letter, he felt as though a very heavy weight were off his mind, and he began to enjoy himself. Not for long, however, for presently they reached Cairo, and there he found a budget awaiting him. Every one seemed to have written to him but Fay; and when he saw that, he began to tear open the letters rather wildly, for he feared she must be ill. But by and by he came to her letter.

He read Erle Huntingdon's first—an indignant letter, evidently written under strong excitement—"Why had he not come home when they had sent for him? He must know that their search had been useless; they had no news of either Fay or the child. Miss Mordaunt was very ill with worry, and her old servant was much alarmed about her. They had written to him over and over again, and directed their letters to every possible place he could not have missed. If he had any affection for his wife and child, and cared to know what had become of them, he had better leave Fitzclarence and the other fellows and return at once," and so on.

Hugh dropped the letter—he was pale to the lips with apprehension—and turned to the others.

They were from Miss Mordaunt, and Mrs. Heron, and Ellerton, and the lawyer, but they only reiterated the same thing—that all efforts had been in vain, and that they could hear nothing of either Lady Redmond or the boy; and then they urged him to come home at once. Lastly, directed by Mrs. Heron, as though by an afterthought, was the letter

Fay had left for him upon the study table; but, in reality, it had been forwarded before the alarm had been given, for the seal was still unbroken. Mrs. Heron, on learning from the messenger that Sir Hugh had started for Egypt, had redirected it, and it had only just been posted when the distracted nurse made her appearance at the Hall and told her story. When Hugh read that poor little letter, his first feeling was intense anger—all his Redmond blood was at fever-heat. She had sinned beyond all mercy; she had compromised his name and his reputation, and he would never forgive her.

He had confided his honour to a child, and she had played with it, and cast it aside; she had dared to leave him and her home, and with his child, too, and to bring the voice of scandal about them; she—Lady Redmond, his wife—wandering like a vagabond at the world's mercy! His feelings were intolerable. He must get back to England; he must find her and hush it up, or his life would be worth nothing to him. Ah, it was well for Fay that she was safely hidden in the old Manse, for, if he had found her while this mood was on him, his anger would have killed her.

When his passion had cooled a little, he went to Fitzclarence and told him abruptly that he must return home at once—affairs of the utmost importance recalled him.

Fitzclarence thought he looked very strange, but something in his manner forbade all questioning. Two hours afterwards he was on his way to England.

There is an old proverb, often lightly quoted, and yet full of a wise and solemn meaning, "*L'homme propose, Dieu dispose.*" Poor, angry Hugh, travelling night and day, and cursing the tardy railways and steamers, was soon to test the truth of the saying.

He had reached Marseilles, and was hurrying to the post-office to telegraph some order to Mrs. Heron, when he suddenly missed his footing, and found himself at the bottom of a steep, dark cellar, with his leg doubled up under him; and

when two passers-by who saw the accident tried to move him, they discovered that his leg was broken; and when he heard that he fainted.

And so fate, or rather Providence, took the reins from the weak, passionate hands that were so unfit to hold them, and threw him back, helpless and baffled, on his bed of pain; there to learn, week by week, through weary sickness and still more weary convalescence, the lesson that only suffering could teach him—that it were well to forgive others their sins, even as he hoped his might be forgiven.

And he learnt yet another thing, as his anger slowly burnt itself out and only profound wretchedness and intolerable suspense remained as to his wife's fate—something that startled him with a sense of sweetness, and yet stung him with infinite pain; when the haunting presence of his lost wife seemed ever with him, and would not let him rest; when his remorse was terrible; and when he would have given up all he had in the world just to hear her say in her low, fond voice that she forgave him all.

For he knew now that he had wronged her, and that his neglect and coldness had driven her from her home.

The uncertainty of her fate sometimes nearly drove him wild. How could she have laid her plans so accurately that no traces of her or the child could be found? Could evil have befallen them? God help him if a hair of those innocent heads had been touched. In his weakness he could not always control the horrible imaginations that beset him. Often he would wake from some ghastly dream and lie till dawn, unable to shake off his deadly terror. Then all of a sudden he would remember that hasty postscript, "Do not be anxious about me. I am going to some kind people who will be good to me and the boy;" and he would fall asleep again while vainly trying to recall if he had ever heard Fay speak of any friends of her childhood. But though Erle and Miss Mordaunt tried to help him, no name occurred to any of them.

It was an added burden that Erle could not come to him; but there was trouble at Belgrave House, and the shadows were closing round it. Erle could not leave his uncle, but he wrote very kindly to poor conscience-stricken Hugh, and said all he could to comfort him.

It was in those hours of dreary helplessness that Hugh learnt to miss his Wee Wifie. In those long summer afternoons, while his foreign nurse nodded drowsily beside him, and the hot air crept sluggishly in at the open window, how he longed for the small cool hand that used to be laid so softly on his temples, or put the drink to his parched lips before they could frame their want. He remembered the hours she had sat beside him, fanning the flies from his pillow or bathing his aching head. She had never left him—never seemed tired or impatient, though her face had grown so pale with watching. Others would have spared her; others told him that she was spent and weary, but he had never noticed it. "And, brute that I was," he thought, "I left her alone in her trouble with only strangers and hirelings about her, to fight her way through the very Valley of the Shadow of Death." He took out her letter and smoothed it out—it was a trick of his when he thought no one would see him. He had read it over until he knew every word by heart. Ah! if Heaven would but spare him this once and give him back the strength he had misused, that he might find her, poor child, and bring her home, and comfort her as only he could comfort her. He would love her now, he thought; yes, if she would only bear with him and give him time, he knew from the deep pity and tenderness which he felt that he would love her yet, for the merciful Providence that had laid the erring man low was teaching him lessons that no other discipline could have inculcated.

The cold December wind was whirling through the bare branches of the oaks and beeches in the Redmond avenue when Sir Hugh came home, a changed and saddened man.

Yes, changed outwardly as well as inwardly. Good Mrs.

Heron cried when she saw him enter the hall on Saville's arm, looking so thin and worn, and leaning on his stick.

His youth seemed to have passed away; his smooth forehead was already furrowed like that of a middle-aged man, and his fair hair had worn off it slightly, making him look ten years older; and yet there was that in Hugh Redmond's face, if Margaret could have seen it, that would have filled her pure heart with exceeding thankfulness.

For though the pallor caused by suffering was still there, and those who saw him said Sir Hugh was a broken man, yet there was a nobler expression than it had ever worn in happier days. The old fretful lines round the mouth were gone; and, though the eyes looked sadly round at the old familiar faces, as though missing the truest and best, still, there was a chastened gravity about his whole mien that spoke of a new and earnest purpose; of a heart so humbled at last that it had fled to its best refuge, and had found strength in the time of need.

Many years afterwards he owned, to one who was ever his closest friend, that a whole lifetime of suffering had been compressed into those few short years that had followed his father's death. The whole plan and purpose of his youth had been marred; his heart wasted by a passion that was denied satisfaction; and lastly, just as he was beginning to turn to his neglected wife with a sympathy and interest that promised well for her future happiness, suddenly he found his name outraged and his home forsaken, and the load and terror of an unbearable remorse laid heavily upon him.

That was a strange winter to Hugh Redmond—the strangest and saddest he had ever passed; when he spent long, solitary days in the old Hall; and only Erle—generous, kind-hearted Erle—came now and then to break his solitude.

Ah! he missed her then.

Sometimes, as he wandered disconsolately through the empty rooms, or sat by his lonely fireside in the twilight, the fancy

would haunt him that she would come back to him yet—that the door would open, and a little figure come stealing through the darkness and run into his arms with a low, glad cry. And sometimes, when he stood in her room and saw the empty cot over which she used to hang so fondly, a longing would seize him for the boy whom he had never held in his arms.

By and by, when the spring returned, some of his old strength and vigour came back, and he was able to join personally in the search, when a new zest and excitement seemed added to his life; and in the ardour of the chase he learnt to forget Margaret and the shadows of a too sorrowful past.

When the sweet face of his Wee Wifie seemed to lure him on, with the sad Undine eyes that he remembered so well; when, with the contrariety of man ever eager for the unattainable, he began to long more and more to see her; when his anger revived, and impatience with it. And, though he hardly owned it to himself, both anger and impatience were born of love.

CHAPTER XXXVII

VANITAS VANITATIS

" And is there in God's world so drear a place,
Where the loud bitter cry is raised in vain ;
Where tears of penance come too late for grace,
As on the uprooted flower the genial rain."

KEBLE.

ST. LUKE'S little summer was over, the ripe golden days that October binds in her sheaf, the richest and rarest of the year's harvest, had been followed by chill fogs—dull sullen days—during which flaring gas-lights burnt in Mrs. Watkins' shop even at noonday, and Fern's busy fingers, never willingly idle, worked by the light of a lamp long before the muffin boy and milkman made their afternoon rounds in the Elysian Fields.

Anything farther removed from the typical idea of the Elysian Fields could scarcely be imagined than on such an afternoon. It was difficult, even for a light-hearted person, to maintain a uniform cheerfulness where damp exuded everywhere, and the moist thick air seemed to close round one in vaporous folds. Somewhere, no doubt, the sun was shining, and might possibly shine again ; but it was hard to realise it—hard to maintain outward or inward geniality under such depressing circumstances.

Fern had turned from the window with an involuntary shudder. Then she lighted her lamp, stirred the fire, and sat down to her embroidery. As her needle flew through the canvas her lips seemed to close with an expression of patient

sadness. There were sorrowful curves that no one ever saw, for Fern kept all her thoughts to herself.

Never since the night when she had sobbed out her grief on her mother's bosom, when the utterance of her girlish despair and longing had filled that mother's heart with dismay, never since then had Fern spoken of her trouble. "We will never talk of it again," she had said, when the outburst was over; "it will do no good;" and her mother had sorrowfully acquiesced.

Mrs. Trafford knew that only time, that beneficent healer, could deaden her child's pain. Fern's gentle nature was capable of quiet but intense feeling. Nea's faithful and ardent affections were reproduced in her child. It was not only the loss of her girlish dreams over which Fern mourned. Her woman's love had unconsciously rooted itself, and could not be torn up without suffering. An unerring instinct told her that Erle had not always been indifferent to her; that once, not so very long ago, his friendship had been true and deep. Well, she had forgiven his fickleness. No bitterness rankled in her heart against him. He had been very kind to her; he would not wish her to be unhappy.

But she was very brave. She would not look at the future. The cold blankness, the narrow groove, would have chilled her heart. She only took each day as it came, and tried to do her best with it.

With her usual unselfishness she determined that no one else should suffer through her unhappiness. Her mother's brief hours of rest should be unshadowed. It was a pale little sunbeam whose smiles greeted her of an evening; but it was still a sunbeam. The sweet looks and words and loving attention were still always ready. As Nea watched her child her heart would swell with pride and reverence. She recognised the innate strength and power of self-sacrifice that Maurice had left her as his legacy. "Of all my children, Fern is most like her father," Mrs. Trafford would say; "she is

stronger than she looks—she would rather die than tell me again that she is unhappy."

But Fern would not have owned that her life was unhappy as long as she had her mother to love her. She was taking herself to task this afternoon as she sat alone—for Fluff had escaped as usual to Mrs. Watkins'—and was blaming herself for her discontent; and then she sang very softly a verse of her favourite hymn—

> "He that thou blessest is our good,
> And unblest good is ill,
> And all is right that seems most wrong
> If it be Thy sweet will."

but almost before she had finished the last line, she was startled by her brother's abrupt entrance.

"Percy! oh, I did not hear you," she faltered, and she turned a little pale, and her heart began to beat more quickly. It was foolish of her, but she never heard Percy's step without listening involuntarily for the quick light tread that used to follow it, but that never came now.

"You are alone," he said, quickly, with a keen glance round the room. "Well, it is best, because I wanted to speak to you. Have you heard from Miss Davenport lately, Fern?"

"Yes," she stammered, raising her soft eyes to his face with a pitying expression; "I had a letter the other day."

"Well," impatiently, "does she say when they are coming back?"

"In another fortnight—at least they mean to start then;" and there she stopped, and looked at him very piteously. "How I wish mother would come; she will not be very long, and—and I would rather that you heard it from her."

"Do you mean that you have anything special to tell me?" he asked, struck by her manner.

"Oh, I wish you had not asked me," she returned, clasping her hands; "you are so fond of Crystal, and it will make you terribly unhappy; but mother said we ought to tell you, Percy,

dear. There was never any hope for you—you know she always told you so; and now Crystal is married."

"Married!" he almost shouted, and his handsome young face seemed to grow sharp and pale. "Married! Pshaw! you are jesting, Fern."

"Dear Percy," she answered, gently, "do you think I would jest with you on such a subject. Indeed—indeed it is true. She was married some ten days ago to Mr. Ferrers, the blind clergyman, who was staying at Belgrave House. He had come there to look for her. He had known her from a child, and they had long loved each other."

"Married!" he repeated, in the same dull, hard voice, and there was something in his face that made Fern throw her arms round his neck.

"Oh, it is hard," she sobbed; "I know how hard it is for you to hear me say this, but it has to be faced. She never deceived you, dear—she never let you hope for a single moment; she was always true to herself and you. Try to bear it, Percy; try to be glad that her unhappiness is over, and that she is married to the man she loves. It is the only thing that will help you."

"Nothing will help me," he returned, in the same muffled voice; but she would not be repulsed. She swept back the dark hair from his forehead and kissed him. Did she not share his sufferings? Could any one sympathise with him as she could? "Oh, if mother were only here," she sighed, feeling her inability to comfort him. "Mother is so sorry for you, she cried about it the other night."

"Yes," he answered, "mothers are like that;" and then was silent again. What was there he could say—he was in no mood for sympathy. The touch of Fern's soft arms, her little attempt at consolation, were torture to him. His idol was gone in another man's possession. He should never see again the dark southern loveliness that had so enthralled his imagination; and the idea was maddening to him.

In a little while he rose, but no speech seemed possible to him. A wall of ice seemed to be built up across his path, and he could see no outlet. "I cannot stay now," he said, and his voice sounded strange to his own ears. "Will you give my love to my mother, Fern?"

"Oh, do not go," she pleaded, and now the tears were running down her face. "Do stay with me, Percy."

"Not now; I will come again," he answered, releasing himself impatiently; but as he mounted his horse, some impulse made him look up and wave his hand. And then he rode out into the gloom.

It was too early to go home; besides, he did not care to face people. The fog seemed lifting a little. His mare was fresh, and she might take her own road, and follow her own pace—a few miles more or less would not matter to him in this mood.

Black care was sitting behind him on the saddle, and had taken the reins from his hands; and a worse gloom than the murky atmosphere was closing round him.

She had told him that his life was before him—that he could carve out his own future; but as he looked back on his past life—on the short tale of his four-and-twenty years—his heart was sick within him.

What a pitiable part he had played. Was it possible that such a woman as Crystal could ever have loved him. Had not his cowardly desertion of his mother only won her silent contempt; and now it was too late to redeem himself in her eyes.

His fate was frowning on him. His position at Belgrave House had long been irksome to him. His grandfather loved him, but not as he loved Erle; and in his heart he was secretly jealous of Erle—if it had been possible he would have supplanted him. Only he himself knew how he had tempted him, and the subterfuges to which he had stooped. He had encouraged Erle's visits to Beulah Place from motives of self-interest, and had been foiled by Erle's engagement to Evelyn Selby.

How he loathed himself as he thought of it all. Oh! if he could only undo the past. Young as he was, ruin seemed staring him in the face. He had squandered his handsome allowance; his debts were heavy. He had heard his grandfather say that of all things he abhorred gambling; and yet he knew he was a gambler. Only the preceding night he had staked a large sum and had lost; and that very morning he had appealed to Erle to save him from the consequences of his own rashness.

As he rode on, his thoughts seemed to grow tangled and confused. His life was a failure; how was he to go on living? All these years he had fed on husks, and the taste was bitter in his mouth. Oh! if he could make a clean breast of it all. And then he repeated drearily that it was too late.

His reins were hanging loosely on his horse's neck. His high-spirited little mare had been following her own will for more than an hour now, and had relapsed into a walk, as Percy roused himself to see where he was. He found himself on a bridge with the river on either side of him. He was miles away from Belgrave House; and for the moment he was perplexed, and drew up to ask a boy who was loitering on the footpath what bridge it was.

There was a steamer passing; and a little lad had clambered on the parapet to see it go by. Either he overbalanced himself or grew giddy, but, to Percy's horror, there was a sharp scream, and the next moment the child had disappeared.

In an instant Percy was off his horse, and, with the agility of a practised athlete, had swung himself on the parapet. Yes, he could see the eddy where the child had sank; and in another moment he had dived into the dark water.

"It was a plucky thing to do, sir," observed a navvy who had seen the whole proceeding, and who afterwards retailed it to Erle Huntingdon; "I don't know as ever I saw a pluckier thing in my life. Ay, and the poor young gentleman would have done it too, for any one could see he knew what he was about;

for he dived in straight after the child; and then, that dratted steamer—you will excuse me, sir, but one's feelings are strong—what must it do but back to pick up the child; and the poor fellow, he must have struck his head against it, for he went down again. Oh yes! the child was all right, and the young gentleman would have been all right too, but for that nasty blow; it stunned him you see."

Yes, it had stunned him; the young ill-spent life was over. Did he call upon his God for succour as he went down into his watery grave? Who knows what cry went up to heaven? The old epitaph that was engraved on the tomb of a notorious ill-liver speaks quaintly of hope in such cases,

> "Betwixt the saddle and the ground
> He mercy sought and mercy found."

and Raby quoted them softly to Crystal as she wept over the fate of her unhappy lover.

"His last act was to try and save another; God only knows how far this would go to redeem a faulty past—God only knows. Do not cry so bitterly, darling. Let us trust him to the All Merciful; and, as the good bishop said to the mother of St. Augustine, 'the child of so many prayers cannot be lost.'"

Erle Huntingdon had passed an anxious, uncomfortable day. Percy's confession of his gambling debts had made him seriously uneasy. It was in his power to help him this once, he had said, with unusual sternness, but he would soon be a married man, and then Percy must look to himself; and Percy, nettled at his tone, had answered somewhat shortly, and in spite of Erle's generosity they had not parted friends.

But this was not all. After luncheon Mr. Huntingdon had called Erle into his study, and had shown him a letter that he had just received from some anonymous correspondent. Some unknown friend and well-wisher had thought it advisable to warn Mr. Huntingdon of his grandson's reckless doings. Erle looked dreadfully shocked as he read it; and the expression of

concentrated anger on Mr. Huntingdon's face frightened him still more.

"Perhaps it is not true," he stammered, and then the remembrance of his conversation with Percy silenced him.

"True," returned Mr. Huntingdon, in his hard rasping voice; "do you not see that the writer says he can prove every word? And this is my grandson, whom I have taken out of poverty. Well, well, I might have known the son of Maurice Trafford would never be worth anything." Strangely unjust words to be spoken of Nea's idolised Maurice, whose pure soul would have revolted against his boy's sins. Erle felt the cruelty of the speech; but he dare not contradict his uncle. What were the Traffords to him now?

There was to be a large gentlemen's dinner-party at Belgrave House that evening. Some East Indian director was to be fêted, and several city magnates were to honour it by their presence. Erle wondered that Percy did not make his appearance, for he was always punctual on such occasions; but Mr. Huntingdon did not seem to notice his absence. The guests thought their host looked greyer and more bowed than usual, and that his step was feebler. He was getting an old man now, they said to themselves; and it would not be long before there would be a new master at Belgrave House. Any one could see he was breaking fast, and would not last long. Well, he had done well for himself; and his heir was to be envied, for he would be a rich man, and scarcely needed the splendid dowry that Evelyn Selby would bring him.

The banquet was just drawing to its close when there were signs of some disturbance in the household. The butler whispered to Erle, who immediately left the room, and a few minutes later a message was brought to Mr. Huntingdon.

Something had happened—something dreadful had happened, they told him, and he must come with them at once; and he had shuddered and turned pale.

He was growing old, and his nerves were not as strong as

they used to be, and he supported himself with some difficulty as he bowed to his guests with old-fashioned politeness, and excusing himself, begged his old friend Sir Frederick Drummond to take his place. But as the door closed behind him, and he found himself surrounded by frightened servants, he tottered and his face grew grey.

"You will kill me among you," he muttered. "Where is my nephew? Will none of you fools tell me what is the matter?"

"He's in there," returned the butler, who was looking very scared, and pointing to the library; and the next moment Erle came out with a face as white as death.

"Oh! uncle, uncle, don't go in till they have told you. Percy is there, and——" but Mr. Huntingdon only motioned him aside with his old peremptoriness, and then closed the door upon them.

He knew what he should find there—he knew it when they whispered into his ear that something had happened; and then he walked feebly across the room to the couch, where something lay with strange rigid lines under a satin coverlid that had been flung over it; and as he drew it down and looked at the face of his dead grandson, he knew that the hand of death had struck him also, that he would never get over this—never!

CHAPTER XXXVIII

NEA AND HER FATHER MEET AGAIN

"Whence art thou sent from us?
Whither thy goal?
How art thou rent from us
Thou that were whole
As with severing of eyelids and eyes, as with sundering of body and soul.
Who shall raise thee
From the house of the dead?
Or what man shall praise thee
That thy praise may be said?
Alas thy beauty! alas thy body! alas thy head!
What wilt thou leave me
Now this thing is done?
A man wilt thou give me,
A son for my son,
For the light of my eyes, the desire of my life, the desirable one."

ALGERNON C. SWINBURNE.

ERLE had followed him into the room, but Mr. Huntingdon took no notice of him. If he could, he would have spoken to him and implored him to leave him, but his tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth. He wished to be alone with his grandson, to hide from every one, if he could, that he was stricken down at last.

He had loved him, but not as he had loved Erle—the Benjamin of his old age; his son of consolation. He had been stern with him, and had never sought to win his confidence; and now the blood of the unhappy boy seemed crying to him from the ground. And it was for this that he had taken him from his mother, that he should lie there in the prime of his youth with all the measure of his sins filled to the brim. How had

he died—but he dared not ask, and no one told him. Erle had indeed said something about a child; but he had not understood any more than he understood that they had sent to tell the mother. Erle's voice, broken with emotion, had certainly vibrated in his ears, but no sense of the words had reached him. If he had known that that mother was already on her way to claim the dead body of her son, he would have hidden himself and his grey hairs.

What a beautiful face it was, he thought; all that had marred it in life was softened now; the sneers, the hard bitter lines, were smoothed away, and something like a smile rested on the young lips. Ah, surely he was at rest now! Some stray hairs clung damply to his temples, and Mr. Huntingdon stooped over him and put them aside with almost a woman's tenderness, and then he sat down on the chair beside him and bowed his grey head in his hands.

He was struck down at last! If his idolised Erle had lain there in Percy's place he could have borne it better. But Nea's boy! What if she should come and require him at his hands! "Come home with your own Nea, father"—had he ever ceased to hear those words?

Had he ever forgotten her standing there in the snow with her baby hidden under her shawl, and her sweet thin face raised to his? Had he ever ceased to love her and yearn for her when his anger was most bitter against her? Surely the demons must have leagued together to keep possession of his soul, or he would never have so hardened himself against her! He had taken her boy from her; he had tempted his youthful weakness with the sight of his wealth, and then he had left him to his own devices. He had not taught him to "wash his hands in innocency, or to take heed to the things that were right." Day and night that boy's dead face, with its likeness to his mother, would haunt his memory. Oh, Heaven! that he were indeed childless, that none of these things might have come upon him.

"Uncle Rolf, will you not come away with me?" implored Erle; "the house is quite quiet now, and all the people have gone;" but Mr. Huntingdon only shook his head—he had no strength to rise from his chair, and he could not tell Erle this. The poor boy was terribly alarmed at his uncle's looks; he did not seem to understand anything he said; and what if Mrs. Trafford should take it in her head to come—if only he could get his uncle away.

But even as he framed the wish the door opened noiselessly, and Mr. Huntingdon raised his eyes. A tall woman with grey hair like his, and a pale, beautiful face with an expression on it that almost froze his blood, looked at him for a moment, then silently passed up the room, and with her dress brushing him as he sat there motionless, paused beside the couch. And it was thus that Nea and her father met again. But she did not notice him; there was only one object for her eyes—the still, mute figure of her boy. Silently, and still with that awful look of woe on her face, she drew the dark head into her arms, and laid the dead cheek against her breast; and as she felt the irresponsive weight, the chilled touch; her dried-up misery gave way, and the tears streamed from her eyes.

She was calling him her darling—her only boy.

She had forgotten his cowardly desertion of her; the faults and follies of his youth. Living, he had been little to her, but she claimed the dead as her own. She had forgotten all; she was the young mother again, as she smoothed the dark hair with her thin fingers and pressed the cold face closer to her bosom, as though she could warm the deadly chill of death.

"Nea," exclaimed a feeble voice in her ear. "Nea, he was my boy too." And looking up, she saw the tall bowed figure of her father, and two wrinkled hands stretched out to her. Ah, she was back in the present again. She laid her boy down on the pillow, and drew the quilt tenderly over him; but all the beauty and softness seemed to die out of her face, as she turned to her father.

"My boy," she answered, "not yours; for you never loved him as I did. You tempted him from me, and made him despise his mother; but he is mine now; God took him from you who were ruining him soul and body, to give him back to me."

"Nea," returned the old man with a groan; "I have sinned—I know it now. I have blighted your life; I have been a hard cruel father; but in the presence of the dead there should be peace."

"My life," she moaned; "my life. Ah, if that were all I could have forgiven it long ago; but it was Maurice—Maurice whom you left to die of a broken heart, though I prayed you to come with me. It was my husband whom you killed; and now, but for you my boy would be living."

"Nea, Nea," he wailed again; "my only child, Nea;" but as she turned, moved by the concentrated agony of his voice, he fell with his face downward on the couch, across the feet of his dead grandson.

* * * * *

The doctors who were summoned said that a paralytic seizure had long been impending; he might linger for a few weeks, but it was impossible to say whether he would ever recover full consciousness again.

Erle heard them sadly; he had been very fond of the old man in spite of the tyrannical sway that had ruled him from boyhood. His uncle had been his generous benefactor, and he could not hear of his danger without emotion.

Mrs. Trafford had not left the house from the moment of her father's alarming seizure; she had taken quiet possession of the sick-room, and had only left it to follow her boy to the grave. Fern was there too, but Erle did not speak to her; the crape veil hid her face, and he could only see the gleam of her fair hair shining in the wintry sunlight. The two women had stood together, Fern holding her mother's hand; and when the service was over, Mrs. Trafford had gone back to Belgrave

House, and some kindly neighbour had taken the girl home. Erle would gladly have spoken some word of sympathy, but Mrs. Trafford gave him no opportunity. Neither of them knew how sadly and wistfully the poor girl looked after them. Erle's changed looks, his paleness and depression made Fern's heart still heavier; she had not known that he had loved Percy so. She had no idea that it was the sight of her own slim young figure moving between the graves that made Erle look so sad. She was dearer to him than ever, he told himself, as they drove away from the cemetery; and he hated himself as he said it.

He had not seen Evelyn since Percy's death. She was staying at some country house with her aunt, Lady Maltravers, where he was to have joined them; but of course this was impossible under the circumstances; and though he did not like to own to himself that her absence was a relief, he took the opportunity of begging her not to hurry back to London on his account, as his time was so fully occupied with necessary business and watching his poor uncle that he would not be free to come to her.

Evelyn sighed as she read the letter; it sounded a little cold to her. If she were in Erle's place she would have wanted him to come at once. Was it not her right, as his promised wife, to be beside him and try to comfort him? How could she have the heart for these hollow gaieties, knowing that he was sad and troubled? If it had been left to her, she would not have postponed their marriage; she would have gone to church quietly with him, and then have returned with him to Belgrave House to nurse the invalid; but her aunt had seemed shocked at the notion, and Erle had never asked her to do so.

Evelyn was as much in love as ever, but her engagement had not satisfied her; every one told her what a perfect lover Erle was—so devoted, so generous. Indeed, he was perfection in her eyes, but still something was lacking. Outwardly she

could find no fault with him, but there were times when she feared that she did not make him happy; and yet, if she ever told him so, he would overwhelm her with kind affectionate speeches.

Yes, he was fond of her; but why was he so changed and quiet when they were alone together? What had become of the frank sunshiny look, the merry laugh, the careless indolence that had always belonged to Erle? She never seemed to hear his laugh now; his light-hearted jokes, and queer provoking speeches, were things of the past. He was older, graver; and sometimes she fancied there was a care-worn look on his face. He was always very indignant if she hinted at this—he always refuted such accusations with his old eagerness; but nevertheless Evelyn often felt oppressed by a sense of distance, as though the real Erle were eluding her. The feeling was strong upon her when she read that letter; and the weeks of separation that followed were scarcely happy ones.

And still worse, their first meeting was utterly disappointing. He had come to the station to welcome them, and had seen after their luggage, and had questioned about their journey; his manner had been perfectly kind, but there had been no eager glow of welcome in his eyes. Lady Maltravers said he looked ill and wearied, and Evelyn felt wretched. But it was the few minutes during which her aunt had left them together that disappointed her most; he had not taken the seat by her at once, but had stood looking moodily into the fire; and though at her first word he had tried to rouse himself, the effort was painfully evident. "He is not happy; there is something on his mind," thought the poor girl, watching him. "There is something that has come between us, and that he fears to tell me."

Just then he looked up, and their eyes met.

"I am afraid I am awfully stupid this evening, Eva," he said apologetically; "but I was up late with Uncle Rolf last night."

"Yes," she answered gently; "I know you have had a terrible time; how I longed to be with you and help you. I did not enjoy myself at all. Poor Mr. Huntingdon; but as you told Aunt Adela, he is not really worse."

"No, he is just the same; perhaps a trifle more conscious and weaker; that is all."

"And there is no hope?"

"None; all the doctors agree in saying that. His health has been breaking for years, and the sudden shock was too much for him. No; it is no use deceiving ourselves; no change can happen but the worst."

"Poor Mrs. Trafford."

"Ah, you would say so if you could see her; Percy's death has utterly broken her down; but she is very brave, and will not spare herself. We think Uncle Rolf knows her, and likes to have her near him; he always seems restless and uneasy if she leaves the room. But indeed the difficulty is to induce her to take needful rest."

"You are looking ill yourself, dear Erle," she returned tenderly; but at that moment Lady Maltravers re-entered, and Erle looked at his watch.

"I must go now," he said hastily; and though Evelyn followed him out into the corridor there were no fond lingering words. "Good-bye, Eva; take care of yourself," he said, kissing her; and then he went away, and Evelyn went back into the room with a heavy heart. He had been very kind, but he had not once said that he was glad to see her back; and again she told herself that something had come between them.

But there was no opportunity for coming to any understanding, for the shadows were closing round Belgrave House, and the Angel of Death was standing before the threshold.

Ah! the end was drawing near now. Mr. Huntingdon was dying.

He had never recovered consciousness, or seemed to re-

cognise the faces round him; not even his favourite Erle, or the daughter who fed and soothed him like an infant; and yet in a dim sort of way he seemed conscious of her presence. He would wail after her if she left him, and his withered hands would grope upon the coverlet in a feeble, restless way, but never once did he articulate her name.

He was dying fast, they told Erle, when he had returned home that night; and he had gone up at once to the sick-room and had not left it again.

Mrs. Trafford was sitting by the bed as usual. She was rubbing the cold wrinkled hands, and speaking to him in a low voice; she turned her white, haggard face to Erle as he entered, and motioned him to be quiet, and then again her eyes were fixed on the face of the dying man. Oh! if he would only speak to her one word, if she could only make him understand that she forgave him now!

"I have sinned," he had said to her, "but in the presence of the dead there should be peace;" but she had answered him with bitterness; and then he had fallen across the feet of his dead grandson, with his grey head stricken to the dust with late repentance. And yet he was her father! She stooped over him now and wiped the death dews from his brow; and at that moment another scene rose unbidden to her mind.

She was kneeling beside her husband; she was holding him in her arms, and he was panting out his life on her bosom.

"Nea," she heard him say again in his weak, gasping voice, "do not be hard on your father. We have done wrong, and I am dying; but, thank God, I believe in the forgiveness of sins;" and then he had asked her to kiss him; and as her lips touched his he died.

"Father," she whispered as she thought of Maurice. "Father!"

The fast glazing eyes turned to her a moment and seemed to brighten into consciousness.

"He is looking at you—he knows you, Mrs. Trafford."

Ah, he knows her at last; what is it he is saying?

"Come home with your own Nea, father—with your own Nea; your only child, Nea;" and as she bends over him to soothe him, the old man's head drops heavily on her shoulder. Mr. Huntingdon was dead.

CHAPTER XXXIX

EVELYN'S REVENGE

"Look deeper still. If thou canst feel
Within thy inmost soul,
That thou hast kept a portion back
While I have staked a whole.
Let no false pity spare the blow,
But in true mercy tell me so.

"Is there within thy heart a need
That mine cannot fulfil?
One chord that any other hand
Could better wake, or still?
Speak now—lest at some future day
My whole life wither and decay."

ADELAIDE ANNE PROCTER

EVELYN SELBY stood at the window, one afternoon about three weeks after Mr. Huntingdon's death, looking out on the snowy gardens of the Square, where two rosy-faced lads were pelting each other with snow-balls.

She was watching them, seemingly absorbed in their merry play; but every now and then her eyes glanced wistfully towards the entrance of the Square with the sober expectancy of one who has waited long, and is patient; but weary.

Erle had once owned to Fay, in a fit of enthusiasm, that Evelyn Selby was as good as she was beautiful; and it was true. Placed side by side with Fern Trafford, and deprived of all extraneous ornament of dress and fashion; most people would have owned that the young patrician bore the palm. Fern's sweet face would have suffered eclipse beside her rival's

radiant bloom and graceful carriage; and yet a little of the bloom had been dimmed of late, and the brown eyes had lost their brightness.

As a well-known figure crossed the Square, she turned from the window with a sigh of relief; "at last," she murmured, as she sat down and made a pretence of busying herself with some fancy work; but it lay unheeded on her lap as Erle entered and sat down beside her.

"I am afraid I am very late this afternoon, Eva," he said, taking her hand. "Mrs. Trafford wanted to speak to me, and so I went up to her room; we had so much business to settle. She has given me a great deal of trouble, poor woman; but I think I shall have my way at last."

"You mean about the money?"

"Yes; I think she will be induced to let me set aside a yearly sum for her maintenance. She says it is only for her children's sake if she accept it; but I fear the truth is that she feels her strength has gone, and that she cannot work for them any longer."

"And she will not take the half?"

"No; not even a quarter; though I tell her that so much wealth will be a heavy burthen to me. Eight hundred a year—that is all she will accept, and it is to be settled on her children. Eight hundred; it is a mere pittance."

"Yes; but she and her daughters will live very comfortably on that; think how poor they have been; indeed, dear, I think you may be satisfied that you have done the right thing; and after all, your uncle wished you to have the money."

"I do not care about it," with a stifled sigh. "We shall be awfully rich, Eva; but I suppose women like that sort of thing. I shall be able to buy you that diamond pendant now that you so admired."

"No, no; I do not want it; you give me too many presents. Tell me, Erle, does Miss Trafford come to see her mother, now she is ill?"

"Yes, of course; but I never see her," he answered so quickly that Evelyn looked at him in surprise. "I have not spoken to her once since Uncle Rolf's death—the lawyers keep me so busy; and I never go into the sick-room unless I am specially invited."

"But poor Mrs. Trafford is better now."

"Yes; and Dr. Connor says that it will be better for her to be anywhere than at Belgrave House. We want to persuade her to go down to Hastings for the rest of the winter. When I see Miss Trafford, I mean to speak to her about it; but"—interrupting himself hurriedly—"never mind all that now; you told me in your letter that you wanted to speak to me particularly. What is it, Eva?" looking at her very kindly.

"Yes; I have long wanted to speak to you," she returned, dropping her eyes, and he could see that she was much agitated. "Erle, you must not misunderstand me; I am finding no fault with you. You are always good to me—no one could be kinder; but you are not treating me with perfect frankness."

"What do you mean?" he asked, astonished at this, for no suspicion of her meaning dawned upon him. "You have no fault to find with me. Surely want of frankness is a fault?"

"Yes, but I think it is only your thought for me. You are so anxious that everything should be made smooth and bright for me, that you do not give me your full confidence, Erle"—pressing closer to him, and looking up in his face with her clear, loving eyes. "Do you think that I can love you so and not notice how changed you have been of late—how pale and careworn? though you have tried to hide from me that you were unhappy."

He pulled his moustache nervously, but he could not answer her.

"How often I have watched for you," she continued, "when your poor uncle's illness has detained you, and have seen you cross the Square with your head bent and such a sad look on your face; and yet, when we meet, you have nothing for me

but pleasant words, as though my presence had dispelled the cloud."

"And why not, Eva? do you think your bright face would not charm away any melancholy mood?" But she turned away as though not noticing the little compliment. He was always making these pretty speeches to her, but just now they jarred on her. It was truth—his whole confidence—that she wanted; and no amount of soft words could satisfy her.

"You are always good to me—always," she went on; "but you do not tell me all that is in your heart. When no one is speaking to you, I often see such a tired, harassed look on your face, and yet you will never tell me what is troubling you, dear; when we come together—when you make me your wife, will our life be always unclouded; am I to share none of your cares and perplexities then?"

He was silent; how was he to answer her?

"It would not be a true marriage," she continued, in a low, vehement tone, "if you did not think me worthy to share your thoughts. Erle, you are not treating me well; why do you not tell me frankly what makes you so unlike yourself. Can you look me in the face and tell me that you are perfectly happy and satisfied?"

"I am very fond of you; what makes you talk like this, Eva," but his eyelids drooped uneasily. How was he to meet those candid eyes and tell her that he was happy—surely the lie would choke him—when he knew that he was utterly miserable.

"Erle," she said in a low voice, and her face became very pale, "you do not look at me, and somehow your manner frightens me; you are fond of me, you say—a few months ago you asked me to be your wife; can you take my hand now and tell me, as I understood you to tell me then, that I am dearer to you than any one else in the world?"

"You have no right to put such a question," he returned angrily. "You have no right to doubt me. I have not deserved this, Eva."

"No right!" and now her face grew paler. "I think I have the right, Erle. You do not wish to answer the question; that is because some one has come between us. It is true, then, that there is some one dearer to you than I?"

He hid his face in his hands. No, he could not lie to her. Was not Fay's miserable exile a warning to him against marriage without confidence. He would have spared her if he could, but her love was too keen-eyed. He could not take her hand and perjure his soul with a lie; he loved her, but he could not tell her that she was the dearest thing in the world to him.

It all came out presently. He never knew how he told it, but the sad little story of his love for Fern Trafford got itself told at last. Poor Erle, he whose heart was so pitiful that he forbore to tread on the insect in his path, now found himself compelled to hurt—perhaps wound fatally—the girl who had given him her heart.

Evelyn heard him silently to the end. The small white hands were crushed together in her lap, and her face grew white and set as she listened; but when he had finished, and sat there looking so downcast, so ashamed, so unlike himself, her clear, unfaltering voice made him raise his eyes in astonishment. "I thank you for this confidence; if—if—" and here her lips quivered, "we had been married, and you had told me then, I think it would have broken my heart; but now—it is better now."

"And you can forgive me, dear; you can be sorry for me. Oh, Eva! if you will only trust me, all may yet be well. I shall be happier now you know the truth."

"There is nothing to forgive," she answered quickly; "it is no fault of yours, my poor Erle, and you were always good to me—no," as he tried to interrupt her, "we will not talk of it any more to-day; my head aches, and of course it has upset me. I want to think over what you have said. It seems"—and here she caught her breath—"as though I can hardly believe

it. Will you go away now, dear, and come to me to-morrow. To-morrow we shall see how far we can trust each other."

"I must go away if you send me," he answered humbly; and then he got up and walked to the door. He had never felt more wretched in his life. She had not reproached him, but all the colour and life had gone out of her face. She had spoken so mildly, so gently to him. Would she forgive him, and would everything be as though this had never happened? "Oh, Erle, will you not wish me good-bye?" and then for a moment the poor girl felt as though her heart were breaking. Was she nothing to him after all?

At her words Erle quickly retraced his steps. "Forgive me, Eva," he said, and there were tears in his eyes; "I am not myself, you know; all this takes it out of a man." And then he stooped over her as though to take her in his arms.

For an instant she shrank from him; then she lifted up her face and kissed him. "Good-bye, Erle," she said, "good-bye, my darling. No one will ever love you as I have loved you." And then, as he looked at her wistfully, she released herself and quietly left the room, and no one saw Evelyn Selby again that night.

The following afternoon Fern stood by the window, looking out on the white, snowy road sparkling with wintry sunlight. Her little black bonnet lay on the table beside her, and the carriage that had brought her from Belgrave House had just driven away from the door. Erle had given special orders that it was to be at Miss Trafford's service, and every morning the handsome bays and powdered footman drew a youthful crowd round the side door of Mrs. Watkins'. Sometimes Fern entered the carriage alone, but very often her little sister was with her. Fluff revelled in those drives; her quaint remarks and ejaculations often brought a smile to Fern's sad lips.

Those visits to Belgrave House were very trying to the girl. Mrs. Trafford used to sigh as she watched her changing colour

and absent looks. A door closing in the distance, the sound of a footstep in the corridor, made her falter and turn pale. But she need not have feared; Erle never once crossed her path. She would hear his voice sometimes, but they never once came face to face. Only one day Fern saw a shadow cross the hall window as she got into the carriage, and felt with a beating heart that Erle was watching her.

That very morning her mother had been speaking to her of Erle's generosity; indeed the subject could not be avoided. "He wanted me to take half his fortune," Mrs. Trafford had said with some emotion; "he is bitterly disappointed at the smallness of the sum I named; do you think I am right to take anything, Fern? My darling, it is for your sake, and because I have no more strength for work, and I feel I can no longer endure privation for my children."

"I think you are right, mother; it would not be kind to refuse," Fern returned quietly; and then she tried to feel some interest in the plans Mrs. Trafford was making for the future. They would go down to Hastings for the rest of the winter,—Fern had never seen the sea,—and then they would look out for some pretty cottage in the country where they could keep poultry and bees, and perhaps a cow, and Fern and she could teach in the village school, and make themselves very busy; and the mother's pale face twitched as she drew this little picture, for there was no responsive light in the soft grey eyes, and the frank, beautiful mouth was silent.

"Yes, mother," she at last answered, throwing her arms round her mother's neck; "and I will spend my whole life in taking care of you."

She was thinking over this conversation now, as she looked out at the snow, when her attention was attracted by a private brougham, with a coronet on the panel, that stopped before Mrs. Watkins', and the next moment a tall girl, very quietly dressed, entered the house.

Fern's heart beat quickly. Was it possible that it could be

Miss Selby? But before she could ask herself the question, there was a light tap at the door, and the girl had entered, and was holding out both her hands to Fern.

"Miss Trafford, will you forgive this intrusion? but I feel as though we knew each other without any introduction. I am Evelyn Selby; I daresay you have heard my name from"—with a pause—"Mr. Huntingdon."

"Oh yes, I have heard of you," returned Fern with a sudden blush. This was Erle's future wife, then—this girl with the tall graceful figure and pale high-bred face that, in spite of its unusual paleness, looked very beautiful in Fern's eyes. Ah, no wonder he loved her! Those clear brown eyes were very candid and true. There could be no comparison between them —none!

She had little idea that Evelyn was saying to herself, "What a sweet face! Erle never told me how lovely she was. Oh, my darling, how could you help it? but you shall not be unhappy any longer!"

"Of course I knew who it was," went on Fern, gently; "you are the Miss Selby whom Mr. Erle is to marry. It is very kind of you to come and see me."

Oh, the bitter flush that passed over Evelyn's face; but she only smiled faintly. "Do you know, it is you who have to do me a kindness. It is such a lovely afternoon, and you are alone. I want you to put on that bonnet again and have a drive with me; the park is delicious, and we could have our talk all the same. No, you must not refuse," as Fern coloured and hesitated at this unexpected request; "do me this little favour—it is the first I have ever asked you." And Fern yielded.

That drive seemed like a dream to Fern. The setting sun was shining between the bare trees in the park, and giving rosy flushes to the snow. Now and then a golden aisle seemed to open; there was a gleam of blue ice in the distance. Miss Selby talked very quietly, chiefly of Mr. Huntingdon's death

and Mrs. Trafford's sudden failure of strength. But as the sunset-tints faded and the grey light of evening began to veil everything, and the gas lights twinkled, and the horses' feet rang out on the frozen road, Evelyn leant back wearily in her place and relapsed into silence. Either the task she had set herself was harder than she thought, or her courage was failing; but the brave lips were quivering sadly in the dusk.

But as the carriage stopped, she suddenly roused herself. "Ah, are we here?" she said with a little shiver; "I did not think we should be home so soon." Then turning to the perplexed Fern, she took her hand gently. "You must have some tea with me, and then the brougham shall take you back;" and, without listening to her frightened remonstrance, she conducted her through a large, brilliantly-lighted hall and down a narrow corridor, while one of the servants preceded them and threw open a door of a small room, bright with firelight and lamplight, where a pretty tea-table was already set.

Fern did not hear the whispered order that Miss Selby gave to the servant, and both question and reply were equally lost on her. "Do not say I have any one with me," she said, as the man was about to leave the room; and then she coaxed Fern to take off her bonnet, and poured her out some tea, and told her that she looked pale and tired. "But you must have a long rest; and, as Aunt Adela is out, you need not be afraid that you will have to talk to strangers. This is my private sanctum, and only my special friends come here."

"I ought to be going home," replied Fern uneasily; for the thought had suddenly occurred to her that Erle might come and find her there, and then what would he think. As this doubt crossed her mind, she saw Miss Selby knit her brow with a sudden expression of pain; and the next moment those light ringing footsteps, that Fern often heard in her dreams, sounded in the corridor.

Fern put down her cup and rose; "I must go now," she

said unsteadily. But as she stretched out her hand for her bonnet, Erle was already in the room, and was looking from one pale face to the other in undisguised amazement.

"Miss Trafford!" he exclaimed, as though he could not believe his eyes; but Evelyn quietly went up to him and laid her hand on his arm.

"Yes, I have brought her. I asked her to drive with me, and she never guessed the reason; I could not have persuaded her to come if she had. Dear Erle, I know your sense of honour, and that you would never free yourself; but now I give you back this"—drawing the diamond ring from her finger; "it is Miss Trafford's, not mine. I cannot keep another woman's property."

"Eva," he remonstrated, following her to the door, for she seemed about to leave them; "I will not accept this sacrifice; I refuse to be set free," but she only smiled at him.

"Go to her, Erle," she whispered, "she is worthy even of you; I would not marry you now even if she refused you, but"—with a look of irrepressible tenderness—"she will not refuse you;" and before he could answer her she was gone.

And Fern, looking at them through a sudden mist, tried to follow Evelyn, but either she stumbled or her strength forsook her. But all at once she found herself in Erle's arms, and pressed closely to him.

"Did you hear her, my darling?" he said, as the fair head drooped on his shoulder; "she has given us to each other—she has set me free to love you. Oh, Fern, I tried so hard to do my duty to her; she was good and true, and I was fond of her—I think she is the noblest woman on God's earth—but it was you I loved, and she found out I was miserable, and now she refuses to marry me; and—and—will you not say one word to me, my dearest?"

How was she to speak to him when her heart was breaking with happiness—when her tears were falling so fast that Erle had to kiss them away. Could it be true that he was really

beside her; that out of the mist and gloom her prince had come to her; that the words she had pined to hear from his lips were now caressing her ear.

But Evelyn went up to her room.

It is not ordained in this life that saints and martyrs should walk the earth with a visible halo round their heads; yet, when such women as Margaret Ferrers and Evelyn Selby go on their weary way silently and uncomplaining, surely their guardian angel carries an unseen nimbus with which to crown them in another world.

CHAPTER XL

AUNT JEANIE'S GUEST

"The cooing babe a veil supplied,
And if she listened none might know,
Or if she sighed;
Or if forecasting grief and care,
Unconscious solace then she drew,
And lulled her babe, and unaware
Lulled sorrow too."

JEAN INGELOW.

ALL the winter Fay remained quietly at the old Manse, tenderly watched over by her kind old friend and the faithful Jean.

For many weeks, indeed months, her want of strength and weary listlessness caused Mrs. Duncan great anxiety. She used to shake her head and talk vaguely to Jean of young folk who had gone into a waste with nought but fretting, and had been in their graves before their friends realised that they were ill; to which Jean would reply, "'Deed and it is the truth, mistress; and I am thinking it is time that Mrs. St. Clair had her few 'broth.'" For all Jean's sympathy found expression in deeds, not words.

Jean seldom dealt largely in soft words; she was somewhat brisk and sharp of tongue—a bit biting, like her moorland breezes in winter time. In spite of her reverential tenderness for Fay, she would chide her quite roughly for what she called her fretting ways. She almost snatched the baby away from her one day when Fay was crying over him.

"Ah, my bonnie man," she said indignantly, "would your

mither rain tears down on your sweet face, and make you sair-hearted before your time? Whisht, then, my bairn, and Jean will catch the sunshine for you;" and Jean danced him vigorously before the window, while Fay penitently dried her eyes.

"Oh, Jean, give him back to me. I did not mean to make him cry; the tears will come sometimes, and I cannot keep them back. I will try to be good—I will, indeed." But baby Hugh had no wish to go back to his mother; he was crowing and pulling Jean's flaxen hair, and would not heed Fay's sad little blandishments.

"The bairns are like auld folks," remarked Jean, triumphant at her success, and eager to point a moral; "they cannot bide what is not bright. There is a time for everything, as Solomon says, 'a time to mourn and a time to dance;' but there is never a time for a bairn to be sair-hearted; neither nature nor Solomon would hold with that, as Master Fergus would say. Ech sirs! but he is a fine preacher, is Master Fergus."

Fay took Jean's reproof very humbly. She shed no more tears when her baby was in her arms. It was touching to see how she strove to banish her grief, that the baby smiles might not be dimmed. Jean would nod her head with grim approval over her pile of finely ironed things as she heard Fay singing in a low sweet voice, and the baby's delighted coos answering her. A lump used to come in Jean's throat, and a suspicious moisture to her keen blue eyes, as she would open the door in the twilight and see the child-mother kneeling down beside the old-fashioned cradle, singing him to sleep. "He likes the songs about the angels best," Fay would say, looking up wistfully in Jean's face. "I sing him all my pretty songs, only not the sad ones. I am sure he loves me to do it."

"Maybe the bairn does not know his mither apart from the women angels," muttered Jean in a gruff aside, as she laid down her pile of dainty linen. Jean knew more than any one else; she could have told her mistress, if she chose, that it was

odd that all Mrs. St. Clair's linen was marked "F. Redmond." But she kept her own counsel.

Jean would not have lifted a finger to restore Fay to her husband. The blunt Scotch handmaiden could not abide men—"a puir-hearted, feckless lot," as she was wont to say. Of course the old master and Mr. Fergus were exceptions to this. Jean worshipped her master; and, though she held the doctrine of original sin, would never have owned that Mr. Fergus had a fault. But to the rest of mankind she was suspiciously uncharitable. "To think he drove her from him—the puir bit lammie," she would say; "and yet the law can't have the hanging of him. Redmond, indeed! but we won't own to any such name. It is lucky the old mistress is not ower sharp-sighted—but there, such an idea would never get into her head."

Fay's secret was quite safe with Jean, and, as the weeks and months went on, a feeling of utter security came over her. She hardly knew how time passed. There were hours when she did not always feel unhappy. The truth was, she was for a long time utterly benumbed by pain; a total collapse of mind and body had ensued on her flight from her home. She had suffered too much for her age and strength. Sir Hugh's alarming illness, and her suspense and terror, had been followed by the shock of hearing from his own lips of his love and engagement to Margaret; and, before she could rally her forces to bear this new blow, her baby had been born.

Fay used to wonder sometimes at her own languid indifference. "Am I really able to live without Hugh?" she would say to herself. "I thought it must have killed me long ago, knowing that he does not love me; but somehow I do not feel able to think of it all; and when I go to bed I fall asleep."

Fay was mercifully unconscious of her own heart-break, though the look in her eyes often made Mrs. Duncan weep. When she grew a little stronger her old restlessness returned, and she went beyond the garden and the orchard. She never wandered about the village, people seemed to stare at her

so; but her favourite haunt was the falls. There was a steep little path by a wicket gate that led to a covered rustic bench, where Fay could see the falls above her shooting down like a silver streak from under the single graceful arch of the roadway; not falling sheer down, but broken by many a ledge and boulder of black rock, where in summer time the spray beat on the long delicate fronds of ferns.

Fay remembered how she used to stroll through the under wood and gather the slender blue and white harebells that came peeping out of the green moss, or hunted for the waxy blossoms of the bell-heather; how lovely the place had looked then, with the rowans or witchens, as they called them—the mountain ash of the south, drooping over the water, laden heavily with clusters of coral-like berries, sometimes tinging the snowy foam with a faint rose tint, and fringed in the background with larch and silver birch; the whole mass of luxuriant foliage nearly shutting out the little strip of sky which gleamed pearly-blue through a delicate network of leaves.

It was an enchanting spot in summer or autumn, but even in winter Fay loved it; its solitude and peacefulness fascinated her. But one day she found its solitude invaded. She had been some months at the Manse, but she had not once spoken to the young minister during his brief visits. She had kept to her room with a nervous shrinking from strangers; but she had watched him sometimes between the services, pacing up and down the garden as though he were thinking deeply.

He was a tall, broad-shouldered young man, with a plain, strong-featured face as rugged as his own mountains; but his keen grey eyes could look soft enough at times, as pretty Lilian Graham knew well; for the wilful little beauty had been unable to say no to him as she did her other lovers. It was not easy to bid Fergus Duncan go about his business when he had made up his mind to bide, and as the young minister had decidedly made up his mind that Lilian Graham should be his promised wife, he got his way in that; and Lilian grew so

proud and fond of him that she never found out how completely he ruled her, and how seldom she had her own will.

Fay heard with some dismay that Mr. Fergus was coming to live at the Manse after Christmas; she would have to see him at meals, and in the evening, and would have no excuse for retiring into her room. Now, if any visitor came to the Manse, Lilian Graham, or one of her sisters,—for there were seven strapping lasses at the farm, and not one of them wed yet, as Mrs. Duncan would say,—Fay would take refuge in the kitchen, or sit in the minister's room—anything to avoid the curious eyes and questioning that would have awaited her in the parlour; but now if Mr. Fergus lived there, Lilian Graham would be always there too.

Mr. Fergus was rather curious about Aunt Jeanie's mysterious guest. He had caught sight of Mrs. St. Clair once or twice at the window, and had been much struck with her appearance of youth; and his remark, after first seeing her in the little kirk, had been, "Why, Aunt Jeanie, Mrs. St. Clair looks quite a child; how could any one calling himself a man ill-use a little creature like that;" for Mrs. Duncan had carefully infused into her nephew's ear a little fabled account of Fay's escape from her husband, to which he listened with Scotch caution and a good deal of incredulity. "Depend upon it, there are faults on both sides," he returned obstinately. "We do not deal in villains now-a-days. You are so soft, Aunt Jeanie; you always believe what people tell you. I should like to have a talk with Mrs. St. Clair; indeed, I think it my duty as a minister to remonstrate with a young wife when she has left her husband."

"Oh, you will frighten the bit lassie, Fergus, if you speak and look so stern," replied his aunt in an alarmed voice. "You see you are only a lad yourself, and maybe Lilian wouldn't care to have you so ready with your havers with a pretty young thing like Mrs. St. Clair. Better leave her to Jean and me." But she might as well have spoken to the wind, for the young

minister had made up his mind that it was his duty to shepherd this stray lamb.

He had already spoken out his mind to Lilian; the poor little girl had been much overpowered by the sight of Fay in the kirk. Fay's beauty had made a deep impression on her; and the knowledge that her betrothed would be in daily contact with this dainty piece of loveliness was decidedly unpalatable to her feelings.

Lilian was quite aware of her own charms; her dimples and sweet youthful bloom had already brought many a lover to her feet; but she was a sensible little creature in spite of her vanity, and she knew that she could not compare with Mrs. St. Clair any more than painted delf could compare with porcelain.

So first she pouted and gave herself airs when her lover came to the farm, and then, when he coaxed her, she burst into a flood of honest tears, and bewailed herself because Fergus was to live up at the Manse, when no one knew who Mrs. St. Clair might be, for all she had a face like a picture.

"Oh, oh, I see now," returned Fergus, with just the gleam of a smile lighting up his rugged face; "it is just a piece of jealousy, Lilian, because Mrs. St. Clair—to whom I have never spoken, mind you—happens to be a prettier girl than yourself," —which was wicked and impolitic of Fergus.

"But you will be speaking to her, and at every meal-time too, and all the evenings when Mrs. Duncan is up in the minister's room; and it is not what I call fair, Fergus, with me down at the farm, and you always up in arms if I venture to give more than a good-day to the lads."

"Well, you see you belong to me, Lilian, and I am a careful man and look after my belongings. Mrs. St. Clair is one of my flock now, and I must take her in hand. Whisht, lassie," as Lilian averted her face and would not look at him, "have you such a mean opinion of me that you think I am not to be trusted to look at any woman but yourself, and I a minister with a cure of souls; that is a poor lookout for our wedded

life." And here Fergus whispered something that brought the dimples into play again; and after a little more judicious coaxing, Lilian was made to understand that ministers were not just like other men, and must be suffered to go their "ain gait."

And the upshot of this conversation was that Fay, found herself confronted at the wooden gate one day by a tall, broad-shouldered young man, who she knew was the young minister. Of course he was going to see the falls, and she was about to pass him with a slight bow, when he stopped her and offered his hand. "I think we know each other, Mrs. St. Clair, without any introduction. I am Fergus Duncan, and I have long wanted to be acquainted with Aunt Jeanie's guest;" and then he held open the gate and escorted her back to the Manse.

Fay could not find fault with the young man's bluntness; she had no right to hold herself aloof from Mrs. Duncan's nephew. He must know how she had avoided him all these months, but he seemed too good-humoured to resent it. He talked to her very pleasantly about the weather and the falls and his uncle's health, and Fay answered him with her usual gentleness.

They parted in the porch mutually pleased with each other; but the young man drew a long breath when he found himself alone.

"Ech sirs! as Jean says, but this is the bonniest lass I have ever set eyes on. Poor little Lilian! no wonder she felt herself a bit upset. Come, I must get to the bottom of this; Aunt Jeanie is too soft for anything. Why, the sables she wore were worth a fortune; and when she took off her gloves her diamond and emerald rings fairly blinded one."

Fergus arrived at the Manse with all his traps about a fortnight after this; and when the first few days were over, Fay discovered that she had no reason to dislike Mr. Fergus's company.

He was always kind and good-natured, and took a great

deal of notice of the baby. Indeed, he never seemed more content than when baby Hugh was on his knee, pulling his coarse reddish hair, and gurgling gleefully over this new game. Fay began to like him very much when she had seen him with her boy; and after that he found little trouble in drawing her into conversation.

His first victory was inducing her to make friends with Lilian. Fay, who shrank painfully from strangers, acceded very nervously to this request. But when Lilian came, her shy, pretty manners won Fay's heart, and the two became very fond of each other.

Fergus used to have long puzzled talks with Aunt Jeanie about her protegé. "What is to be done about Mrs. St. Clair when Lilian and I are married?" he would ask; "the Manse cannot hold us all."

"Eh, lad, that is what Jean and me often say; but then the summer is not here yet, and maybe we can find a cottage in Rowan-Glen, and there is Mrs. Dacre over at Corrie that would house them for a bit. Mrs. St. Clair was speaking to me about it yesterday. 'Where do they mean to live when they are married?' she says quite sensible-like. 'Is there anywhere else I can go to make room for them?' And then she cried, poor bairn, and said she would like to stay in Rowan-Glen."

"Mrs. St. Clair," observed Fergus one day, looking up from his writing, "don't you think people will be talking if you stay away from your husband any longer?" for he had once before said a word to her on the subject, only Fay had been hysterical and had begged him not to go on.

"Oh," she said, turning very pale, and dropping her work, "why will you speak to me of my husband, Mr. Fergus?"

"Because I think you ought to go back to him," he replied, in a quiet, business-like tone; "it is a wife's duty to forgive—and how do you know that your husband has not bitterly repented driving you away from him. Would you harden your heart against a repentant man?"

"My husband does not want me," she returned, and a spasm crossed her face. "Should I have left him if he wanted to keep me? 'One of us must go,' that is what he said."

"Are you sure you understood him?" asked Fergus; but he felt at the moment as though it would relieve his feelings to knock that fellow down; "a man can say a thing when he is angry which he would be sorry to mean in his cooler moments."

"I saw it written," was the low answer; then, with an effort to silence him, "Mr. Fergus, you do not know my husband—you cannot judge between us. I was right to leave him; I could not do otherwise."

"Was his name St. Clair?" he asked somewhat abruptly; and as Fay reddened under his scrutinising glance, he continued rather sternly, "please do not say 'yes' if it be untrue; you do not look as though you could deceive any one."

"My husband's name is St. Clair," replied Fay, with as much displeasure as she could assume. "I am not obliged to tell you or any one else that it is only his second name. I have reasons why I wish to keep the other to myself."

"Thank you, Mrs. St. Clair," answered Fergus, moved to admiration by this frankness and show of spirit; "believe me, it is through no feeling of idle curiosity I put this question, but because I want to help you."

"Yes, I know you are very good," replied Fay, more gently.

"If you would only trust us, and give us your confidence," he continued earnestly. "Aunt Jeanie is not a woman of the world, but she has plenty of common-sense; and forgive me if I say you are very young, and may need guidance. You cannot hide from us that you are very unhappy, and that the husband you have left is still dear to you——" But Fay could hear no more; she rose with a low sob and left the room, and Fergus's little homily on wifely forbearance was not finished.

It was so each time that he reopened the subject. Fay would listen up to a certain point, and seem touched by the

young minister's kindness and sympathy, but he could not induce her to open her heart to him. She was unhappy—yes, she allowed that; she had no wish to leave her husband, but circumstances had been too strong for her, and nothing would induce her to admit that she had done wrong.

"Who would have thought that little creature had so much tenacity and will," Fergus said to himself, with a sort of vexed admiration, after one of these conversations; "why, Lilian is a big woman compared to Mrs. St. Clair, and yet my lassie has not a tithe of her spirit. Well, I'll bide my time; but it will not be my fault if I fail to have a grip of her yet."

But the spring sunshine touched the rugged tops of Ben-muich-dhu and Ben-na-hourd before Fergus got his "grip."

He was taking his porridge one morning, with an English paper lying beside his plate, when he suddenly started, and seemed all at once very much absorbed in what he was reading. A few minutes afterwards, when Fay was stooping over her boy, who lay on the carpet beside her, sprawling in the sunshine, he raised his eyes, and looked at her keenly from under his bent brows; but he said nothing, and shortly afterwards went off to his study; and when he was alone, he spread out the paper before him, and again studied it intently.

A paragraph in the second column had attracted his attention—

"A reward of two hundred pounds is offered to any person who can give such information of Lady Redmond and her child as may lead to them being restored to their friends. All communications to be forwarded to Messrs. Green and Richardson, Lincoln's Inn."

And just above—

"Fay, your husband entreats you to return to your home or at least relieve his anxiety with respect to you and the child. Only come back, and all will be well. HUGH."

"And Hugh is the baby's name. Aye, my lady, I think I

have the grip of you at last," muttered Fergus, as he drew the inkstand nearer to him.

The next morning Messrs. Green and Richardson received a letter marked "private," in which the writer begged to be furnished without delay with full particulars of the appearance of the missing Lady Redmond, and her age and the age of the child; and the letter was signed, "Fergus Duncan, the Manse, Rowan-Glen."

CHAPTER XLI

UNDER THE ROWANS

" My wife, my life. O we will walk this world,
Yoked in all exercise of noble end,
And so thro' those dark gates across the wild
That no man knows. Indeed I love thee: come,
Lay thy sweet hands in mine and trust to me."

TENNYSON'S *Princess*.

FERGUS was not kept long in suspense; his letter was answered by return of post. Messrs. Green and Richardson had been evidently struck with the concise, business-like note they had received, and they took great pains in furnishing him with full particulars, and begged that, if he had any special intelligence to impart, he would write direct to their client, Sir Hugh Redmond, Redmond Hall, Singleton.

After studying Messrs. Green and Richardson's letter with most careful attention, Fergus came to the conclusion that it would be as well to write to Sir Hugh Redmond. He was very careful to post this letter himself, and, though he confided in no one, thinking a secret is seldom safe with a woman, he could not hide from Lilian and Aunt Jeanie that he was "a bit fashed" about something.

"For it is not like our Fergus," observed the old lady tenderly, "to be stalking about the rooms and passages like a sair-hearted ghost."

Sir Hugh was sitting over his solitary breakfast, with Pierre

beside him, when, in listlessly turning over his pile of letters, the Scotch postmark on one arrested his attention, and he opened it with some eagerness. It was headed, "The Manse, Rowan-Glen," and was evidently written by a stranger; yes, he had never heard the name Fergus Duncan.

"Dear Sir," it commenced, "two or three days ago I saw your advertisement in the *Standard*, and wrote at once to your solicitors, Messrs. Green and Richardson, begging them to furnish me with the necessary particulars for identifying the person of Lady Redmond. The answer I received from them yesterday has decided me to act on their advice, and correspond personally with yourself. My aunt, Mrs. Duncan, has had a young married lady and her child staying with her all the winter. She calls herself Mrs. St. Clair, though I may as well tell you that she has owned to me that this is only her husband's second name" —here Hugh started, and a sudden flush crossed his face.

"She arrived quite unexpectedly last September. She had been at the Manse as a child, with her father, Colonel Mordaunt;" here Hugh dropped the letter and hid his face in his hands. "My God I have not deserved this goodness," rose to his lips; and then he hastily finished the sentence, "and she begged my aunt to shelter her and the child, as she had been obliged to leave her husband; and as she appeared very ill and unhappy, my aunt could not do otherwise.

"The particulars I have gleaned from Messrs. Green and Richardson's letter have certainly led me to the conclusion that Mrs. St. Clair is really Lady Redmond. Mrs. St. Clair is certainly not nineteen, and her baby is eleven months old; she is very small in person—indeed, in stature almost a child; and every item in the lawyer's letter is fully corroborated.

"We have not been able to gain any information from Mrs. St. Clair herself; she declines to explain why she has left her home, and only appears agitated when questions are put to her. Her fixed idea seems to be that her husband does not want her. Her health has suffered much from her ceaseless fretting,

but she is better now, and the child thrives in our mountain air.

"As the sight of your handwriting would only excite Mrs. St. Clair's suspicions, it would be as well to put your answer under cover, or telegraph your reply. I need not tell you that you will be welcome at the Manse, if you should think it well to come to Rowan-Glen.—I remain, dear sir, yours faithfully, FERGUS DUNCAN."

A few hours later a telegram reached the Manse.

"I am on my way; shall be at the Manse to-morrow afternoon. No doubt of identity; unmarried name Mordaunt. H. REDMOND."

"Aunt Jeanie must be taken into counsel now," was Fergus's first thought as he read the telegram; his second was, "better sleep on it first; women are dreadful hands at keeping a secret. She would be fondling her with tears in her dear old eyes all the evening, and Mrs. St. Clair is none so innocent, in spite of Jean and Lilian calling her a woman-angel. Ay, but she is a bonnie lassie though, and brave-hearted as well," and the young minister's eyes grew misty as he shut himself up in the study to keep himself safe from the temptation of telling Aunt Jeanie.

He had a sore wrestle for it though; but he prided himself on his wisdom; when, after breakfast the next morning, he led the old lady into the study, and, after bidding her prepare for a shock, informed her that Mrs. St. Clair's husband, Sir Hugh Redmond, would be down that very afternoon.

He might well call Aunt Jeanie soft, to see her white curls shake tremulously, and the tears running down her faded cheeks.

"Eh, my lad—eh, Fergus," she sobbed, "Mrs. St. Clair's husband—the father of her bairn. Oh, whatever will Jean say? she will be for running away and hiding them both—she cannot bide the thought of that man."

"Aunt Jeanie," broke in Fergus in his most masterful voice, "I hope you will not be so foolish as to tell Jean; remember I

have trusted this to you because I know you are wise and sensible, and will help me. We have made ourselves responsible for this poor child, and shall have to account to Sir Hugh if we let her give us the slip. I have said all along that no doubt there were faults on both sides, only you women will take each other's parts. Now, I am off to the farm to see Lilian. Just tell Jean that I am expecting a friend, and she had better choose a fine plump pair of chicks for supper; she will be for guessing it is Lothian or Dan Ambleby, or one of the old lot, and she will be so busy with her scones and pasties that one will hardly venture to cross the kitchen." And then, begging her to be careful that Mrs. St. Clair might not guess anything from her manner, Fergus strode off to the farm to share his triumph and perplexities with Lilian.

It was well for Aunt Jeanie that Fay was extremely busy that day, finishing a frock for her baby; so she sat in her own room all the morning at the window overlooking the orchard, and baby Hugh, as usual, crawled at her feet.

He was a beautiful boy now, with the fresh, fair complexion of the Redmonds, with rough golden curls running over his head, and large, solemn grey eyes. Fay had taught him to say "dada," and would cover him with passionate kisses when the baby lips fashioned the words. "Yes, my little boy shall go home to his father some day, when he can run about and speak quite plain," she would tell him; and at the thought of that day, when she should give him up to Hugh, she would bury her face in the fat creasy neck, and wet it with her tears. How would she ever live without her little child?" she thought; but she knew, for all that, that she would give him up.

When Fergus returned to luncheon, he found Aunt Jeanie had worked herself almost into a fever—her pretty old face was flushed and tremulous, her eyes were dim when Fay came into the room carrying her boy.

"He is far too heavy for you, Mrs. St. Clair," exclaimed Fergus, hastening to relieve her. "I know mothers' arms are

generally strong, but still this big fellow is no light weight. What are you going to do with yourself this afternoon? Aunt Jeanie always takes a nap in Uncle Donald's room, but I suppose you have not come to the age for napping."

"No," returned Fay with a smile; "but Jean has finished her preparation for the strange gentleman, and she wants to take baby down to Logill; Mrs. Mackay has promised her some eggs. It will do the boy good, will it not, Mrs. Duncan?" turning to the old lady; "and as I have been working all the morning, and it is such a lovely afternoon, I think I will go down to the falls."

"That is an excellent idea," returned Fergus with alacrity before his aunt could answer. He had to put down the carver to rub his hands, he was so pleased with the way things were turning out—Mrs. St. Clair safely at the falls, where they knew exactly where to find her; Jean, with the boy and her basket of eggs comfortably occupied all the afternoon; and Aunt Jeanie obliged to stay with Uncle Donald. Why, he would have the coast clear and no mistake. Sir Hugh would have no difficulty in making his explanations with the Manse parlour empty of its womankind.

He had received a second telegram, and knew that the expected visitor might be looked for in an hour's time; but it was long before that that he saw Jean with the boy on one arm, and the basket on the other, strike out bravely down the Innery Road, from which a cross lane led in the direction of the village where the accommodating Mrs. Mackay lived.

A few minutes later Mrs. St. Clair passed the parlour window. It was a lovely May day, and she wore a dainty spring dress—a creamy silky fabric—and a little brown velvet hat, which particularly suited her. As she saw Fergus, she looked up and smiled, and then called Nero to order as he scampered amongst the flower beds.

"Ay, my lady, I have my grip of you now," he observed, with a gleam in his eyes, as he turned away.

About twenty minutes later he heard the click of the gate, and saw a tall, fair-bearded man, in a tweed travelling suit, walking up the steep little path, and casting anxious glances at the windows. Mrs. Duncan saw him too.

"Ay but he is a goodly man," she said half aloud. "I like a man to walk as though all the world belongs to him;" and for the first time a doubt crossed her mind, whether Fay's childishness may not have been to blame; for Hugh Redmond's handsome face and frank, careless manner always found favour in women's eyes.

Fergus felt himself impressed by Sir Hugh's lordly bearing; he felt an awkward, raw-boned Scotchman beside this grand-looking aristocratic man. As he went out into the porch, Sir Hugh put out his hand, and said, in a quick agitated voice, "Mr. Duncan, you have made me your debtor for life, but we will talk of that presently. Will you take me to my wife, please?"

"Certainly, but Mrs. St. Clair—Lady Redmond, I mean—has gone down to the Rowans—the falls over yonder; shall we walk there at once, or will you come in and rest a little?" moved by the pale harassed look of the face before him. "You have had a long journey, Sir Hugh, and perhaps you would like to get rid of the dust."

"No, I cannot rest until I have seen my wife; you will understand my feelings, I am sure, Mr. Duncan;" and Fergus took down his hat from the peg, and said gravely that he could well understand them. "It is only a step," he continued, "and I will just walk with you to the gate. The Rowans is Lady Redmond's favourite haunt; she thinks there is no place to compare with the falls. You will find no difficulty if you follow the little path"—but with that rare intuition that belongs to a sympathetic character, Fergus said no more. He could see that Sir Hugh was much agitated at the thought of the impending meeting; and directly they reached the wicket-gate leading to the falls, he pointed to the path, and retraced his steps to the Manse.

Hugh gave a sigh of relief as he found himself alone. His hand shook a little as he unlatched the gate. As he passed the covered rustic seat he noticed a few sprays of withered heather that had been lying there since last year. Perhaps Fay had gathered them.

He hesitated a moment—should he wait for her here or seek her farther? A trifle decided him. Among the raspberry bushes that tangled the underwood was a little bunch of wild flowers caught on a bramble. The floral message seemed to lure him onward, and he followed the narrow, winding path. By and by he came to a little green nook of a place as full of moss and sunshine as a nest; there was a great pool near it, where some silver trout were leaping and flashing in the light. The whole spot seemed to come before him strangely. Had he seen it in a dream?

He crept along cautiously. He fancied he had caught a white gleam between the trees that was neither sunshine nor water. He groped his way through the underwood, putting the branches back that they might not crackle, and then all at once he stood still; for he saw a little runlet of a stream making dimples of eddies round a fallen tree, and a great silver birch sweeping over it; and there, in her soft spring dress, with the ripples of golden-brown hair shining under her hat, was his lost Wee Wifie. She had floated a rowan branch on the stream and was watching it idly, and Nero, sitting up on his haunches beside his little mistress, was watching it too.

Hugh's heart beat faster as he looked at her. He had not admired her much in the old days, and yet how beautiful she was. Either his taste had changed or these sad months had altered her; but a fairer and a sweeter face he owned to himself that he had never seen, and all his man's heart went out to her in a deep and pitiful love. Just then there was a crackling in the bushes and Nero growled, and Fay, looking up startled, saw her husband standing opposite to her.

In life there are often strange meetings and partings;

moments that seem to hold the condensed joy or pain of years. One grows a little stony—a little colourless. There are flushes perhaps, a weight and oppression of unshed tears, and a falter of questions never answered; but it is not until afterwards that full consciousness comes, that one knows that the concentrated essence of bitterness or pleasure has been experienced, the memory of which will last to our dying days. It was so with Fay when she looked up from her mossy log and saw Hugh with his fair bearded face standing under the dark larches. She did not faint or cry out, but she clasped her little hands, and said piteously, "Oh, Hugh, do not be angry with me. I tried so hard to be lost," and then stood and shivered in the long grass.

"You tried so hard to be lost," he said in a choked voice. "Child, child, do you know what you have done? you have nearly broken my heart as well as your own. I have been very angry, Fay, but I have forgotten it now; but you must come back to me, darling, for I cannot live without my Wee Wifie any more;" and as she hid her face in her trembling hands, not daring to look at him, he suddenly lifted the little creature in his arms; and as Fay felt herself drawn to his breast, she knew that she was no longer an unloved wife.

* * * * *

She was calmer now. At his words and touch she had broken into an agony of weeping that had terrified him; but he had soothed her with fond words and kisses, and presently she was sitting beside him with her shy, sweet face radiant with happiness, and her hands clasped firmly in his. He had been telling her about his accident, and his sad solitary winter, and of the heart-sickness that he had suffered.

"Oh, my darling, will you ever forgive me?" she whispered. "It was for your sake I went. How could I know that you would miss me so—that you really wanted me? it nearly killed me to leave you; and I do not think I should have lived long if you had not found me."

"My child," he said very gravely and gently, "we have both done wrong, and must forgive each other; but my sin is the heavier. I was older and I knew the world, and I ought to have remembered that my child-wife did not know it too. If you had not been so young you would never have left me, but now my Wee Wifie will never desert me again."

"No, never. Oh," pressing nearer to him with a shudder, "to think how you have suffered. I could not have borne it if I had known."

"Yes," he said lightly, for her great, beautiful eyes were wide with trouble at the recollection, and he wanted to see her smile, "it has changed me into a middle-aged man. Look how my hair has worn off my forehead, and there are actually grey hairs in my beard. People will say we look like father and daughter when they see us together."

"Oh," she returned shyly, for it was not quite easy to look at him—Hugh was so different somehow—"I shall not mind what people say. Now I have my own husband back, it will not matter a bit to me how grey and old you are." Then, as Hugh laughed and kissed her, she said in a very low voice, "Do you really mean that you can be content with me, Hugh; that I shall not disappoint you any more?"

"Content," he answered fondly, "that is a poor word. Have I ever really deserved you, sweetheart; but I mean to make up for that. You are very generous, Fay; you do not speak of Margaret—ah, I thought so," as her head drooped against his shoulder—"she is in your mind, but you will not venture to speak of her."

"I am so afraid you must regret her, Hugh."

And Hugh, with a shade of sadness on his fine face, answered slowly:

"If I regret her, it is as I regret my lost youth. She belongs to my old life; now I only reverence and cherish her memory. Darling, we must understand each other very clearly on this point, for all our unhappiness springs from that. We must

have no secrets, no reservations in our future life; you must never fear to speak to me of Margaret. She was very dear to me once, and in some sense she is dear to me still, but not now, thank God, so precious in my eyes as the wife He has given me." Then, as she put her arms round his neck and thanked him with innocent, wifely kisses, he suddenly pressed her to him passionately, and asked her to forgive him, for he could never forgive himself.

Then, as the evening shadows crept into the green nest, Fay proposed timidly that they should go back to the Manse, for she wanted to show Hugh their boy; and Hugh consented at once. And hand in hand they went through the tangled underwood and past the shimmering falls; and as Hugh looked down on his little wife and saw the new sweet womanliness that had grown on her with her motherhood, and the meek purity of her fair young face, he felt a proud happiness thrilling within him, and knew that it was God-given, and that its blessing would last him throughout his whole life.

CHAPTER XLII

KNITTING UP THE THREADS

Day unto day her dainty hands
Make life's soil'd temples clean,
And there's a wake of glory where
Her spirit pure hath been.
At midnight through that shadow land
Her living face doth gleam,
The dying kiss her shadow, and
The dead smile in their dream.

GERALD MASSEY.

A LITTLE later, Jean, honest woman, suffered an electric shock. She was brushing out baby Hugh's curls, that had been disordered by the walk, when she thought she heard Mrs. St. Clair's footsteps, only it was over quick like, as she remarked later, "like a bairn running up the stairs," but she fairly shook with surprise when the door opened, and a rosy, dimpled, smiling little creature stood before her.

"Give me the baby, Jean, quick—no, never mind his sash he looks beautiful. My husband has come, and he wants to see him. Yes, my boy! Father has come"—nearly smothering him with kisses, which baby Hugh returned by mischievous grabs at her hair.

"Ech sirs," began Jean, turning very red; but before she could give vent to her surprise, a big, grand-looking man suddenly entered the old-fashioned room, and took mother and child in his arms before her very eyes.

Jean vanished precipitately, and Mrs. Duncan found her an

hour afterwards, basting the fowls with a skewer, while the iron ladle lay at her feet, and with a stony, impassive expression on her face which always meant strong disapproval with Jean.

"Well, Jean," remarked her mistress cheerily, while her white curls bobbed with excitement, "have you heard the news, my woman? That pretty creature has got her husband, and he is as fine a man as one could ever set eyes on, and that is all a mistake about his not wanting her—a parcel of childish rubbish."

"Hoots, lass," as Jean remained glum and silent, and only picked up the iron spoon with a toss of her head, "you do not look over-pleased, and yet we are bidden to rejoice with them that do rejoice. Why, he is a baronet, Jean, and as rich as Crœsus, and she is Lady Redmond, bless her dear heart! Why, I went into the nursery just now, and it was just a lovely sight, as I told Fergus. The bairn had been pulling at her hair, and down it came, a tumbling golden-brown mass, over her shoulders like the pictures of a woman-angel, and she just laughed in her sonsie way, and tried to gather it up, only Sir Hugh stopped her. 'Let it be, Fay, you look beautiful so,' he says, worshipping her with his eyes. Oh, it was good to hear him; and then he looks up and sees me, and such a smile comes to his face. Oh, we understood each other." But to all this Jean apparently turned a deaf ear, only when her mistress had finished, but not a moment before, she answered crossly, how was the tea-supper to be ready for the gentry if folks hindered her with their clavers, at which hint Mrs. Duncan, judging which way the wind blew, prudently withdrew.

But the moment the door closed on her mistress, Jean sat down, and throwing her rough apron over her head, had a good cry.

"Woman-angel indeed," she sobbed, "and how am I to bide without her and the bairn, and they the verra light of the house—as the saying is?"

But Jean's grief did not hinder her long. The fowls were done

to a turn, and the rashers of ham grilled to a delicate brown; the tea-supper, always an institution at the Manse, looked a most inviting meal, with piles of oat-cake, freshly baked scones, and other bread stuff, the best silver tea-pot hooded in its satin cosy, and the kettle singing on its brass tripod.

Sir Hugh looked on at the preparations with the zest of a hungry traveller as he sat in the old minister's arm-chair talking to Fergus; but every moment his eyes turned expectantly to the door. The young Scotchman smiled as he patted Nero, for he knew their guest was only giving him scant attention.

"I hope Aunt Jeanie is content with 'the brutal husband' now," he thought, with a chuckle of amusement. "I wonder what my lady is doing all this time."

My lady had been extremely busy. First she had put up the hair that baby Hugh's naughty little fingers had pulled down; then she had gone in quest of a certain dress that reposed at the top of one of the trunks. Janet had insisted on packing it, but she had never found an opportunity of wearing it. It was one of those dainty, bewildering combinations of Indian muslin and embroidery and lace, that are so costly and seductive; and when Fay put it on, with a soft spray of primroses, she certainly looked what Fergus called her, "Titania, queen of all the fairies."

Both the men absolutely started when this brilliant little vision appeared in the homely Manse parlour. Fergus clapped his big hands softly together and said "Ech sirs!" under his breath; but Sir Hugh, as he placed a chair for her, whispered in Fay's ear, "I am afraid I have fallen in love with my own wife"—and it was delicious to hear Fay's low laugh in answer.

What a happy evening that was; and when, some two or three hours later, Fay stood in the moonlight watching Hugh go down the road on his way to the Inn, for there was no room for him in the Manse, the parting words were ringing in her ears, "Good-night, my dear one, and dream of me."

Ah, they were happy tears that Jean's woman-angel shed by her boy's cot that night; what prayers, what vows for the future went up from that pure young heart, that at last tasted the joy of knowing itself beloved. As for Hugh, a waking dream seemed to banish sleep from his eyes. He could see it all again—the green sunshiny hollow, and the shining pool—a little listless figure standing under the silver birch. A tremulous voice breaks the silence—"oh, Hugh, I tried so hard to be lost, do not be angry with me"—— No, no, he will not go back to that. Stay, he is in the Manse parlour—the door opens—there is Titania in her spring dress, all smiles and blushes; his Wee Wifie is transformed into the queen of all the fairies. "God bless her, and make me worthy of her love," he thinks humbly, as he recalls her sweet looks and words; and with that brief prayer he slept.

Fay would willingly have remained for a few days with her friends at the Manse; she wanted to show Hugh all her favourite haunts, and to make him better acquainted with the good Samaritans who had so generously sheltered her; but Hugh was anxious to have his wife to himself and to get over the awkwardness of the return home. He would bring her back in the Autumn he promised her; and with that Fay consoled poor Jean.

As for Fergus, he had reason to bless Aunt Jeanie's hospitality; for Sir Hugh overwhelmed the inhabitants of the Manse with liberal tokens of his gratitude—Aunt Jeanie, Fergus, Jean, even pretty Lilian Graham, reaped the effects of English munificence. Fay had *carte blanche* to buy anything or everything she thought suitable. Silk dresses, furs, books, and a telescope—long the ambition of the young minister—all found their way to the Manse; not to mention the princely gift that made the young couple's path smooth for many a year to come. Want of generosity had never been a Redmond failing. Hugh's greatest pleasure was to reward the people who had sheltered his lost darling.

It was a painful moment for Hugh's proud nature when he first crossed the threshold of his old Hall, with Fay looking shy and downcast beside him, but Fay's simplicity and childishness broke the brief awkwardness; for the moment she saw Mrs. Heron's comely face she threw her arms round her neck with a little sob, and there was not a dry eye among the assembled servants when she said in her clear young voice—"Oh, how glad I am to be amongst you all again. Was it not good of my husband to bring me back? You must all help me to make up to him for what he has suffered."

"It was too much for the master," observed Ellerton afterwards, "he just turned and bolted when my lady said that—a man does not care to make a fool of himself before his servants; he would have stood by her if he could, but his feelings were too much for him, and you see he knew that he was to blame."

But Fay would allow nothing of the kind, when she followed him into the library, and saw him sitting with his face hidden on his folded arms, and the evening sunshine streaming on his bowed figure.

Fay stood looking at him for a moment, and then she quietly drew his head to her shoulder—much as though he were baby Hugh, and wanted her motherly consolation.

"My darling husband," she whispered, "I know it is all my fault, but you have forgiven me—you must not let me make you unhappy."

"Oh," he said bitterly, "to think I have brought my wife to this that she should need to apologise to her own servants. But then they all know you are an angel."

But she would not let him talk like this. What were his faults to her—was he not her husband? If he had ill-used her, would she not still have clung to him? "Dear, it is only because of your goodness and generosity that I am here now," she said, kissing his hand; "you need not have looked for me, you know;" and then she made him smile by telling him

of Ellerton's quaint speeches; and after that he let himself be consoled.

Years afterwards he told her, that the days that followed their return home were their real honeymoon, and she believed him; for they were never apart.

Bonny Bess hailed her mistress with delight, and Fay resumed her old rides and drives; only her husband was always with her. Hugh found out, too that her clear intelligence enabled her to enter into all his work, and after that he never carried out a plan without consulting her; so that Fay called herself the busiest and happiest little woman in the world.

And what of Margaret?

In one of the most crowded courts of the East End of London there is a Sister who is known by the name of "Our Sister," though many patient, high-souled women belonging to the same fraternity work there too.

But "Our Sister" is, *par excellence*, the favourite, from the crippled little road-sweeper who was run over in Whitechapel Road to the old Irishwoman who sold oranges by day, and indulged in free fights with others of her sex at night. "And the Heavens be her bed, for she is a darlint and an angel," old Biddy would say; and it would be "tread on the tail of my coat"—for it was an Irish quarter—if any man or boy jostled "Our Sister" ever so lightly.

"Our Sister" used to smile at the fond credulity and blind worship of these poor creatures. She was quite unconscious that her pale, beautiful face, bending over them in sickness, was often mistaken for the face of an angel. "Will there be more like you up yonder?" exclaimed one poor girl, a Magdalene dying, thank God, at the foot of the Cross; "if so, I'll be fine and glad to go."

"What do they do without you up there, honey?" asked another, an old negro woman whose life had been as black

as her skin, "they will be wanting you bery much, I'm thinking;" and little Tim, dying of his broken bones, whispered as "Our Sister" kissed him, "I am wishing you could die first, Sister, and then it would be first-rate, seeing you along with the gentry at the Gate;" for, to Tim's ignorant mind, the gentry of heaven were somewhat formidable. "And what must I say to them, plase your honour? when they come up and says 'Good morning, Tim;' but if Sister were along of them she would say, 'It is only Tim, and he never learnt manners nohow.'"

Raby would come down sometimes, bringing his wife with him, and talk to Margaret about her work.

"You are very happy, dear," he said one day to her; "I have often listened to your voice, and somehow it sounds satisfied."

"Yes," she returned quietly, "quite satisfied. Does that sound strange, Raby? Oh, how little we know what is good for us. Once I thought Hugh's love was everything, but I see now I was wrong. I suppose I should have been like other women if I had married him; but I should not have tasted the joy I know now. Oh, how I love my children—dirty, degraded, sinful as they are; how I love to spend myself in their service. God has been good to us, and given us both what He knew we wanted," and Raby's low "Amen" was sufficient answer.

There was one who would willingly have shared Margaret's work, and that was Evelyn Selby; but her place was in the world's battlefield, and she kept to her post bravely.

Fern, in her perfect happiness, often thought tenderly of the girl to whose noble generosity she owed it all; but for some years she and Evelyn saw little of each other. Fern often heard of her visits to the cottage where her mother and Fluff lived. She and Mrs. Trafford had became great friends. When Evelyn could snatch an hour from her numerous engagements, she liked to visit the orphanage where Mrs. Trafford

worked. Some strange unspoken sympathy had grown up between the girl and the elder woman.

Evelyn's brave spirit and dauntless courage had carried her through a trial that would have crushed a weaker nature. Her life was an uncongenial one. Often she sickened of the hollow round of gaiety in which Lady Maltravers passed her days; but she would not waste her strength by complaint.

But by and by, when she had lost the first freshness of her youth, and people had begun to say that Miss Selby would never marry now, Hedley Power crossed her path, and Evelyn found that she could love again.

Mr. Power was very unlike the bright-faced young lover of her youth. He was a grey-haired man in the prime of middle-age, with grave manners, and a quiet thoughtful face—very reticent and undemonstrative; but Evelyn did well when she married him, for he made his wife a happy woman.

"Evelyn is absurdly proud of Hedley," Lady Maltravers would say; "but then he spoils her, and gives her her way in everything." Every one thought it was a pity that they had no children; but Evelyn never owned that she had a wish ungratified. She contented herself with lavishing her affection on Erle's two boys. To them Aunt Evelyn was a miracle of loveliness and kindness; and the children at the orphanage had reason to bless the handsome lady who drove down often to see them.

"I do think Evelyn is happy now," Fern said one day to Erle, when they had encountered Evelyn and her husband in the Row.

"Of course she is," he would answer; "much happier than if she had married your humble servant. Hedley Power is just the man for her. Now, dear, I must go down to the House, for Hugh and I are on committee;" and the young M.P. ran lightly downstairs, whistling as he went, after the fashion of Erle Huntingdon.

Yes, Hugh Redmond represented his county now, and Fay had her house in town, where her little fair-haired sons and daughters played with Erle's boys in the Square gardens.

The young Lady Redmond would have been the fashion, but Fay was too shy for such notoriety, and was quite content with her husband's admiration. And well she might be, for the face that Hugh Redmond loved best on earth was the face of his Wee Wifie.

FINIS

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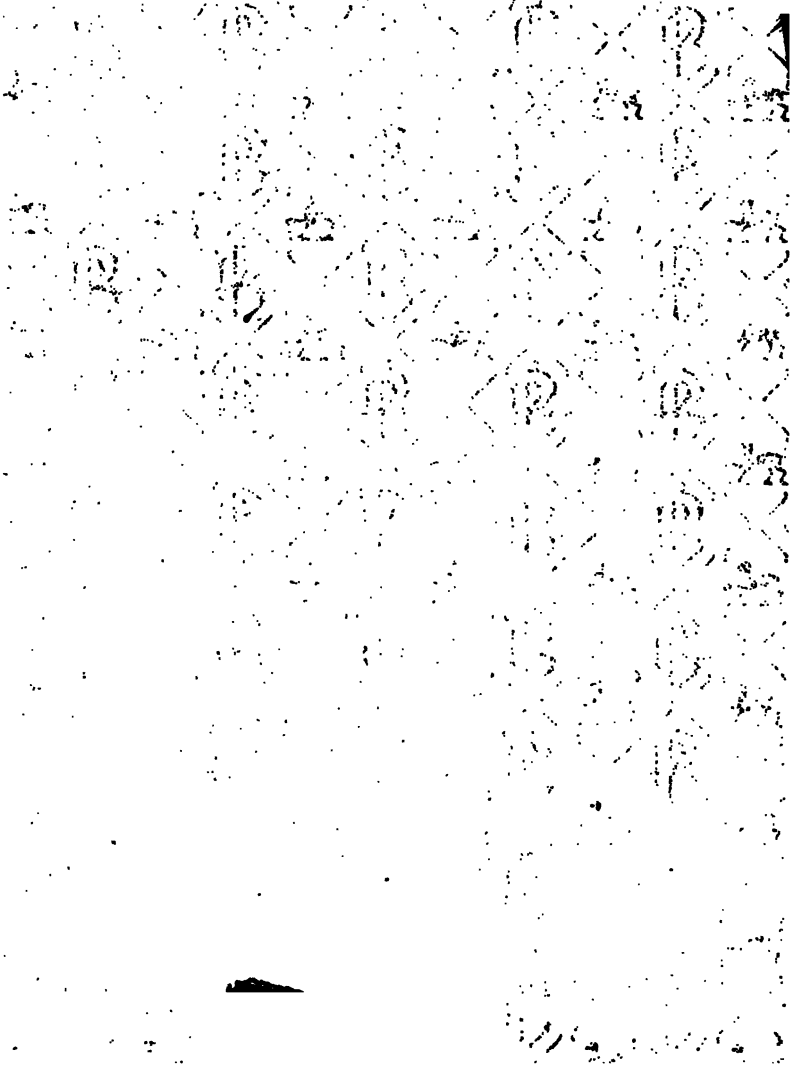
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